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## Beyond the Comfort Zone



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# Contents

- 04 **Preface**
- 06 **Out of the Comfort Zone:**  
Finding Direction in a Disordered World
- 10 **A Post-Liberal West?**
- 14 **One Battle After Another:**  
A US Game of Supplier Whac-a-Mole and Chinese Energy Resilience
- 19 **The shift to a New Global Order:**  
The Role of Companies in the EU's Rising Geopolitical Muscle
- 24 **Comrade Donald?**  
MAGA as the Great Misdirected Class Struggle
- 28 **Under Construction:**  
Europe's Economic Repositioning in a Fragmented International Order
- 32 **Learning to Navigate the Geopolitical Storm:**  
The First Year of the oiip Academy
- 34 **Beyond Soft Power:**  
How Turkish TV Dramas Shape Global Politics
- 38 **Going Solar in a Hurry:**  
The Perks and Pains of Lebanon's Rushed Energy Transition
- 42 **"It Is What It Is"**  
Hoping for Justice
- 46 **"Flourishing in the Abyss"**
- 52 **The Fall of an "Illiberal Democracy":**  
Lessons to be Learned for Europe from Orbán's Electoral Defeat
- 56 **More Than Trade:**  
AfCFTA and Africa's Development Agenda in a Fragmenting Global System
- 60 **Revitalizing Europe:**  
Civil Society and Civic Engagement as New Democratic Infrastructure
- 64 **Young Voices of the oiip**



## Beyond Soft Power:

How Turkish TV Dramas Shape Global Politics



## 38

### Going Solar in a Hurry:

The Perks and Pains of Lebanon's Rushed Energy Transition



# 42

## “It Is What It Is”

Hoping for Justice



# 14

## One Battle After Another:

A US Game of Supplier Whac-a-Mole and Chinese Energy Resilience



# 06

## Out of the Comfort Zone:

Finding Direction in a Disordered World

# Editorial

**Dear Friends, Colleagues,  
Members, and Supporters**

We are very proud to publish the third issue of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs' magazine, REFLECTIONS. This is particularly remarkable, as we do not receive any funding or other financial support for this publication. REFLECTIONS aims to make the analysis of international politics, trends, and global dynamics accessible to a broader audience, extending beyond the academic community.

This year's issue, titled "Beyond the Comfort Zone," focuses on the many dynamics and layers of change that we are witnessing at the international, national, regional, local, and even personal levels. While these ongoing changes have undoubtedly affected societies around the globe, it is Europe in particular that has moved, or been pushed, beyond its comfort zone.

The world of yesterday, as we knew it, was largely shaped by "the West" – by Europeans, the USA, and the transatlantic consensus about the liberal world order. It is now dissolving in front of our eyes. Although transitions from one order to another are difficult, painful, and unpredictable, we strongly believe that new opportunities also emerge beyond the comfort zone. Therefore, we have asked our authors to highlight not only potential risks, but also new opportunities. This requires a look beyond Europe. There is much to learn from non-Western societies that have long been exposed to volatility, and have therefore developed strategies and mechanisms to cope with these challenges.

This year's issue brings together experts from diverse fields, countries, and backgrounds.

We hope you enjoy reading REFLECTIONS and that it offers you new perspectives, inspiration, and hope for the space beyond Europe's comfort zone.

We would also like to invite you to support independent research, expertise, and knowledge by becoming a member.

**Editorial Team**

# Preface

by Cengiz Günay



## What Happens Beyond the Comfort Zone?

The world as we knew it seems to be falling apart. A fundamental transformation has been unfolding globally. It takes place simultaneously at different speeds and across multiple levels, reshaping every aspect of life. The international order, the logics of politics, the forms of governance, the role of institutions, the composition of industries, the rationale of economic policy, knowledge production, the sources of information, and even the way that we communicate are in rapid flux. We find ourselves in a state of liminality; a condition that is characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. While the structures, institutions, habits, and ideas that have long shaped our world have not disappeared, they are increasingly being disrupted, challenged, and, in some cases, replaced by new dynamics, practices, and forms of organization.

Such periods of liminality are often characterized by disorder, instability and contestation. States, companies, and other actors are competing to secure power, influence, and strategic advantage, while seeking to reposition themselves within a rapidly evolving international landscape.

Ayşe Zarakol argues in her interview for REFLECTIONS that this era of liminality may not be a short transitional phase between two ages. On the contrary, drawing on the experiences of the 17th century, she argues that we might rather be witnessing the beginning of a prolonged period of disorder. She concludes that we must prepare ourselves for an uncertain future.

A policy of ruling by strength has increasingly supplanted the principle that states, irrespective of their size, have a voice and at least formally enjoy equal status. At the same time, it is important not to romanticize the past. States and their voices were never equal. The liberal world was one dominated by the West, its ideas, rules, norms, culture, and not least economies. While it provided a framework for cooperation and stability, it also embodied an asymmetrical hierarchy.

Europe, one of the beneficiaries of the liberal, rule-based world order, has been struggling to adapt to its ongoing

transformations. Although, many mourn for the good old days, there is no way back. The old continent is no longer a defining power. Its ability to shape global developments has further diminished, while new centres of power increasingly set the pace and direction of international affairs. Europe has moved beyond its comfort zone.

And yet, beyond this comfort zone is the area where established orders dissolve, and change becomes possible.

In this third issue of REFLECTIONS, we have tried to focus not only on the negative aspects of the ongoing transformations, but rather on the potential and opportunities that emerge in a changing world. Seeing and grasping opportunities however requires the acknowledgement of one's own strengths, weaknesses, agency, and readiness to change. Zarakol highlights in this context that Europe has many good things that it needs to preserve and strengthen. And yet there is much to learn from the experiences and best practice examples of others, as some of our articles highlight.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has shaken confidence in the transatlantic alliance. Cuts to aid for Ukraine, threats toward Greenland and NATO, and tariff disputes have pushed Europeans to seek greater strategic autonomy. Yet Emiliano Alessandri argues that these tensions are more likely to reshape US-European relations than end them, creating a more pluralistic post-liberal order rooted in democratic values. He further contends that China's rise and shifting global power dynamics may ultimately reinforce the need for transatlantic cooperation, making a renewed US-Europe partnership a lasting geopolitical necessity.

Thomas Eder's contribution analyses how China may profit from its efforts to reduce dependence on external energy suppliers and maritime chokepoints during the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis. Eder argues that, in an increasingly uncertain world, Europe may benefit from looking beyond its traditional approaches and drawing lessons from China's long-term investments in energy security, resilience, and strategic autonomy.

Johannes Leitner and Hannes Meissner examine how major powers use trade, technology, finance, and supply chains as geopolitical tools, turning companies into both targets and instruments of economic coercion. They argue that in an era of weaponized interdependence and economic nationalism, Europe's influence increasingly depends on corporate behaviour, requiring firms to balance commercial goals with security and resilience concerns.

Johannes Späth explains that Donald Trump's electoral success and the rise of right-wing populism primarily stem from economic insecurity among the American working class rather than cultural grievances. While in previous elections voters called for material change, the Democratic Party focused too much on defending institutions while neglecting voters' everyday economic concerns, a relevant lesson for European democracies facing populist challenges today.

Marie Krpata argues in her contribution that geopolitical and economic pressures have forced Europe to move beyond its traditional economic model of open markets and rules-based globalization. She examines how the EU is adapting to strategic competition and economic coercion while also seeking to boost competitiveness, reduce dependencies, and strengthen its ability to act in an increasingly fragmented world.

Ceren Çetinkaya's article takes readers into the world of Turkish historical TV series, showing how popular culture, as a form of soft power, influences international politics by reshaping collective memory. She argues that struggles over history, identity, and regional leadership are increasingly fought not only through politics and economics, but also through media and storytelling.

Camillo Stubenberg, in turn, examines Lebanon's shift to decentralized solar energy in the wake of state failure and economic collapse. He shows how households, local networks, and global supply chains filled the gap left by a dysfunctional energy system, demonstrating that energy transitions are never a purely technical processes but also reshape everyday life, social relations, and inequality. Lebanon's experience offers important insights into how a society can adapt under conditions of profound uncertainty.

Christina Hainzl's contribution focuses on the Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's search for justice after the killing of his parents Mahmoud Naim Cherri and Nadira Hayek in an Israeli air strike on Beirut. Hainzl examines the limits of international accountability, the symbolic power of legal action, and the ways in which personal loss can become a public challenge to indifference. In doing so, he highlights the enduring importance of memory, responsibility, and human dignity in times of violence.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 marked a dramatic turning point in Venezuela's contemporary history, revitalizing hope for change while leaving the country's future uncertain. Sophie Reichelt, Olena Butnyk, and Emilia Webhofer examine solidarity networks that emerged in Venezuela in response to autocratization, state repression, and economic collapse. Drawing on interviews with Venezuelan scholars, journalists, and activists, they explore whether these networks can help overcome the legacy of the Maduro era, address the country's crisis, and contribute to a democratic renewal.

Ivan Vejvoda's article analyses an important turning point in Europe: the end of Viktor Orbán's sixteen-year rule in Hungary. Vejvoda traces how, under Orbán, Hungary became not only a symbol of democratic backsliding but also a focal point for illiberal and sovereigntist movements seeking to reshape Europe from within. Orbán's electoral defeat demonstrates that even entrenched illiberal and authoritarian systems remain vulnerable to democratic change. The elections in Hungary therefore represent an important signal in the broader struggle for Europe's future direction.

Vedran Džihic also highlights the role of civil society as a source of resilience and democratic renewal. He argues that freedom, solidarity, and political imagination need citizens who are willing to act, organize, and defend democratic values. In doing so, he offers a powerful reminder that democracy cannot be delegated to institutions but ultimately depends on civic engagement and the capacity to imagine a better political future.

Tsion Bergano highlights the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a positive example of cooperation emerging from the region. The AfCFTA aims to alter the continent's traditional role as an exporter of raw materials to Western economies by strengthening intra-African trade. Its underlying logic is to foster integrated production systems, processing, manufacturing, logistics, financing, and distribution networks that operate across national borders.

This issue also features a presentation of the newly founded oiip-Academy. The academy aims to bring the expertise and networks of our institute and researchers into executive education programs. Our modular programs combine academic insight with practical tools to help professionals navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world. In light of the overwhelmingly positive evaluations, we have given space to some of the participants' comments and reflections.

The future is often discussed without the input of those who will shape it most directly. As young people are the agents of the future, we have asked our incredibly smart and talented younger colleagues and interns to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly uncertain world. Their contributions are collected under the section Young Voices. These short contributions explore questions of the future of democracy, security, social justice, resilience, and international cooperation, offering fresh perspectives on how to navigate a period of profound global change.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity and thank our authors, as well as Petra Podesser, Tara Petkov, Emilia Webhofer, Annika Scharnagl and the rest of the Editorial Team for making REFLECTIONS happen again. Our wonderful graphic designer Sabine Müller has again done a fantastic job. I would also like to thank Karla Heltriegel, Jens Wirth Salander and Wyatt Cole for English proofreading.

**Also, many thanks to all our members, supporters, donors and cooperation partners for their continuing trust in us and our work.**

**Enjoy reading and exploring opportunities beyond the comfort zone!**

**Cengiz Günay**  
Director



# Out of the Comfort Zone: Finding Direction in a Disordered World

Interview with **Ayşe Zarakol**,  
Professor at the University of Cambridge



Foto: © Jean-Luc Benazet

**Cengiz Günay:** Dear Ayşe, may I start with a very general question? The world is witnessing a major reconfiguration of power, particularly within the international system. We all sense that something bigger is unfolding, even if it's still difficult to understand where it will lead. I'd be interested in your assessment of current developments and how you would characterize this era.

**Ayşe Zarakol:** I think most scholars in international relations see this as a moment of big power transition, a time when great power competition has come back. This is mainly driven by the rivalry between the United States and China. They rival over spheres of influence, and there is an AI race between the two. However, great power competition is just one aspect of the fundamental changes that we are experiencing. The 21<sup>st</sup> century differs from the 20<sup>th</sup> in four fundamental respects. Firstly, we can observe a general erosion of trust across all regime types and across the globe. People distrust the institutions and political solutions that reflect the logic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that are based on political parties and ideologies. There are certainly exceptions where this is not the case, but, in most places, voters and citizens have increasingly rejected the 20<sup>th</sup>-century equilibrium. First signs of this development could already be observed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the collapse of the

Soviet bloc. In fact, Eastern European societies were the first to reject the dominant political model; now this trend has also reached the West. In Western democracies, which were seen as the successful countermodel to communist dictatorships, we can now observe growing skepticism toward liberalism, democracy, and capitalism. There is growing skepticism toward the very values, norms, and institutions that we strongly associate with the West.

Secondly, there is the global trend of strongmen. They are different from those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While much of modern history was characterized by moving away from personalized states, where sovereignty resides with a person or a family, toward institutions and institutionalization, we are now witnessing a return to personalized sovereignty. This is not necessarily only tied to politicians. Some of the tech bros and oligarchs meanwhile appear to have reached state-level capacity. Some, such as Elon Musk, who for a time

“ We need to be mentally prepared for the fact that the situation we find ourselves in today is unlikely to improve anytime soon”

Photo: © KJ Firefly

also led a state agency, may occupy an in-between position between state power and private entrepreneurship.

**Cengiz Günay:** Does this trend entail the gradual demise of the nation state?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Not really. Nation states are still here. They continue to exist, but the growing distrust in the solutions and institutions of the nation state, together with the trend toward strongmen, indicates that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century nation state is not necessarily the building block that international relations assumes it to be. International relations has become more complex also because, thirdly, there is the rise of the rest.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do you mean the rise of non-Western countries?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Yes, we talk a lot about the rise of the Global South, and some of it may indeed be hype. Great powers still possess greater capabilities, but

compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many more countries now have significant resources and influence. Many of them were not even independent for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, there are now far more actors in international relations.

**Cengiz Günay:** What is the fourth factor?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** That is the volatility created by structural pressures. These pressures were not entirely absent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they were not as drastic as now. Just think of the effects of climate change, or of technological change that comes with AI, robotics, surveillance, and so on. They change everything ranging from production to warfare.

**Cengiz Günay:** These are tectonic shifts that are taking place on different levels and simultaneously...

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Yes, we used to take the grounds for granted. Now the ground itself is shifting. Recently, I was at a meeting with Tanisha Fazal, who is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. She gave a talk on climate change in which she referred to the metaphor used by realist IR scholars that compares international relations to a billiard pool, and countries to billiard balls bouncing off one another. She argued that we are now at a moment when the billiard table itself has become unstable. I think this captures the situation of our time very well.

**Cengiz Günay:** Is this different from previous times?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Yes, today, it's not just great power politics. When we studied great power politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we could assume a stable billiard table. Now, it is turning into quicksand. It makes things rather unpredictable.

**Cengiz Günay:** How would you then frame this moment of time?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** I would say we are in a moment of disorders.

**Cengiz Günay:** Is this temporary until a new order emerges?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Many people believe that disorder cannot last long, and that some kind of order will emerge relatively quickly. This can be through a world war, or without war. Also, something resembling the Cold War order might come into being. However, I am skeptical. There are now so many variables that it is difficult to imagine any kind of decisive sorting event that could create equilibrium for everyone.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do you mean that a new order is more likely to emerge in consequence of a war, a catastrophe, or confrontation and deterrence?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Hopefully not, but, yes, these are possible options. Of course, a World War would be horrible and no one wishes for that. But, objectively, the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had an ordering effect: they re-ordered the world. They had the dimension of “world wars,” because, due to colonialism, European powers were everywhere. These two major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were between blocks which shared certain European norms. A world war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be different.

**Cengiz Günay:** How?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** We have entered a new time. Today, the world is much less Eurocentric and also less organized than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The world is fragmented and divided into many camps. Europe is now one among many actors; it is not anymore the organizing actor. Many different conflicts overlap, but they do not coalesce.

**Cengiz Günay:** When you talk about an ordering actor, is this necessarily a state actor, or could it be also something like ideational change, ideology, technology that re-orders? >

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Well, it could be, but I don't see any candidates for that either. I mean, that's another contributor to disorder.

**Cengiz Günay:** We see the rise of authoritarianism. Could authoritarianism be a force that re-orders the world?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** As the new authoritarian systems are personalistic and not ideological, they are also quite unpredictable. This further deepens uncertainty and disorders.

**Cengiz Günay:** The title of this year's issue of our Magazine is "Beyond the Comfort Zone" and, as far as I understand, the ongoing changes mainly push Europe out from its comfort zone. Would you agree?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** I agree, a world in disorder is much beyond Europe's comfort zone. After World War II, Western Europe was quite sheltered. It was protected under the American security umbrella, practiced liberal democracy, and societies largely enjoyed the social welfare state. These things are still in place, and Europe's image in the world is still shaped by these assets, but they are fading. Western Europe was the beneficiary of the post-World War order. This order, and therefore Europe's privileged position in the world, are now ending. European states and actors, policymakers are having difficulties in coming to terms with these new realities. They have a hard time to let go and attain new positions.

**Cengiz Günay:** How about the future of the transatlantic partnership, which has been a cornerstone of European security?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Europe is in a difficult position. Because of Trump, Europeans would like to chart a more independent course, but cannot do so easily, as for decades Europe delegated military protection, and all kinds of technology, to the US.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do you think this deep rift in transatlantic relations is more profound and will outlast Donald Trump and his presidency?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** It is certainly not only Trump. On the US side, this rift has much deeper legs. The estrangement on the US side has been coming for a long time. Maybe since the end of the Cold War. There have been people who did not want to invest in Europe and European security. Trump is just very blunt in the way he voices criticism, but many in the US think that Europe has been free-riding. In the future, a Democratic President may be more diplomatic, but it won't much change the course. The major concern is China's rise. Many Republicans and Democrats see the conflict with China as an existential rivalry. In part, this has been also pushed by the tech companies. Many in the US believe that Europe has to stand by the United States in this growing conflict, but they also think that if Europe chooses not to, the US could do without it. The rift would deepen if Europe were to push back. At the moment, European policymakers, whether on the Left or the Right, are trying to get by through a more conciliatory approach. Hence, there may not be a deeper rift in transatlantic relations, but that does not mean this is the best option for Europe. If Europe simply follows along without asserting a position of its own, then this is certainly not a good way forward for Europe.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do you think there are countries that might benefit more from disorder?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** I don't think that any country will benefit from this, but countries of the Global South and more peripheral countries such as Turkey for instance, have more practice in dealing with uncertainty. They were not primary beneficiaries of the old order. They are more used to dealing with adversity from great powers. They do not have the same emotional attachment to the

old world order. Europe, in contrast, is having more difficulties, because it has been used to order and hasn't developed practice in dealing with disorder.

**Cengiz Günay:** It seems the emerging disorder puts particularly democracies under stress.

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Yes, it is a difficult time for democracies. Whereas the liberal post-Cold War order incentivized democratization and many states tried to copy the Western model, today, the international environment is almost incentivizing a shift to personalistic regimes with small decision-making units. They promise to be able to react more quickly to developments and challenges. It has become all about short-term decisions, survival tactics, and deals. In other words, disorder is a structural environment that favors short-term thinking and planning. It is not the time of grand strategies, long-term plans, and lengthy institutional processes. This is another reason why it is difficult for the EU. Decision-making mechanisms in the EU are complex and they require consensus.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do we have historical precedents for this kind of disorder? Can we draw on examples from earlier periods in world history?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** I like to compare our time to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the old Asian order, which until then had been expanding, fragmented. The Northern Hemisphere was strongly affected by climate cooling, characterized by very cold winters and cool summers, which had severe effects on agricultural production. We can also observe demographic decline and the disruption of trade routes. The 17<sup>th</sup> century was also the era of the rise of absolutist rule, in which monarchs tried to concentrate all power in their own hands. At the same time, it was a period of major scientific discoveries. Although the situation today is not exactly the same, I like to refer to the

“ Europe needs to decide what are the right things to hold onto, such as democracy, the welfare state, and putting citizens first.”

17<sup>th</sup> century as an analogy because it was a long period of disorder before a new order could emerge. I encourage people to think through that comparison, because I believe we need to be mentally prepared for the fact that the situation we find ourselves in today is unlikely to improve anytime soon. We need to figure out how to survive in an uncertain world with no agreed-upon rules.

**Cengiz Günay:** How did a new order emerge after the 17<sup>th</sup> century?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** Well, there was a long period of fragmentation, and then Europe created its own regional order. After the 30 years war there emerged the Westphalian system, and from there it created a global order, but not from scratch. It went to Asia and it repurposed some of the existing institutions, and routes, and so on. But, it took a long time. I don't think we can talk about a global order comparable to the one that was lost after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The establishment of a new order took almost 200 years, until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today, everything is happening much faster. There is an accelerating effect of technology, and civilization has become more complex. Therefore, I would not say that it is going to take 200 years, it might take much shorter. However, we need



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to be prepared that it may not just take a few years. It may not be a blip. Much of the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will most probably remain fragmented.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do we then need to prepare ourselves for chaos?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** No, it doesn't necessarily mean that there will be chaos. There will be pockets of order where rules still apply. But we need to understand that the things we used to take for granted, such, for instance, a rules- and law-based international order, is fragmenting. However, it is also important to say that this order never really worked as described, and certainly not for everyone in the same way. However, the world seemed to have a center, and a hierarchy, and now it is just fragmenting.

**Cengiz Günay:** Do you see new opportunities that open up beyond the comfort zone? What are Europe's opportunities in this new era?

**Ayşe Zarakol:** When you are stepping out of the comfort zone you start to rethink some things that don't work

well. But, at the same time, there is a lot that is great about Europe and European democracies. Europe needs to decide what are the right things to hold onto, such as democracy, the welfare state, and putting citizens first. I think Europe is great about those things; it has a relatively egalitarian vision of society. And then you need to get rid of some things to be able to adapt to new realities. Europe will need to abandon a hierarchical view of the world, and the assumption that Europe has always the best answer for everything. It should develop a more egalitarian view of the world and be able to also learn from other places.

**Ayşe Zarakol** is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Cambridge and a Politics Fellow at Emmanuel College. She is also affiliated with Sabancı University in Istanbul. She is also member of oiiip's Advisory Board. Zarakol was elected to the British Academy and Academia Europaea in 2024.

# A Post-Liberal West?

by **Emiliano Alessandri**

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**W**ith US President Donald Trump swinging a wrecking ball at the world and treating European allies possibly even worse than America's adversaries, it is hard to be optimistic about either the global order or transatlantic relations. Everybody seems to agree that the transatlantic relationship as we know it has run its course and will not be restored even after Trump. May this portend the "end of the West?"

A dispassionate interpretation of recent developments suggests less hyperbole. What Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney calls a "rupture" may turn out to be a watershed at which the West – a construct that has meant different things at different points in time – will be redefined instead of jettisoned altogether. Between no West and an illiberal West, perhaps a "post-liberal" West will emerge from the ongoing turmoil.

This new West may no longer be bound together under American leadership, yet it will continue to share an interest in managing strategic competition with non-Western actors. Ideologically, it will depart from a number of orthodoxies that defined the "liberal order" during the height of Western predominance, many of which were long regarded by critics as having been carried to excess, especially in the economic and social domains. Yet, it will likely remain rooted in principles that the West has been instrumental in advancing, including democracy, individual dignity, and fundamental rights.

## **Infatuations with Western Hemispherism and European Strategic Autonomy**

From a strategic standpoint, China's rise and the structural shift in global power towards the emerging

economies should make the logic of transatlantic cooperation more compelling – not less. The specter of relative decline is currently fueling recrimination and division across the Atlantic. As the stakes become more apparent, however, the same dynamic could lead to renewed transatlantic alignment.

In this light, the Trump administration's fixation with the Western Hemisphere – exemplified by gunboat diplomacy in Venezuela and efforts to acquire Greenland (which caused a serious spat with Denmark and America's transatlantic allies) – is not to be interpreted necessarily as the US turning its back on Europe and the world.

Rather, it may signify that Washington has determined, in a rejection of "globalism" rather than a sign of retrenchment, that the reassertion of

# “Between no West and an illiberal West, perhaps a “post-liberal” West will emerge from the ongoing turmoil.”

the American national interest starts with confronting America's adversaries in its immediate neighborhood, which has long been considered an extension of US national security. That this approach is currently being operationalized in an imperialistic way makes it contemptible, but no less strategically coherent.

In any event, the Trump administration has already discovered that Western Hemispheric dominance will not relieve Washington from managing international challenges in other parts of the world, as the recent US-Israeli war against Iran has highlighted. And precisely because regional power balances are as important as ever, the US President and his entourage may soon come to appreciate that engaging Europe – in a reformed transatlantic relationship – remains crucial even under America First.

Without Europe as its partner, America will find it far more difficult to compete with China for global primacy, as its network of alliances remains one of Washington's most obvious strategic advantages over the most formidable rival it has yet confronted. And should Europe, left to its own devices, one day falter under internal or external pressures, America's own security would be imperiled. The US learned this lesson repeatedly in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – during WWI, WWII, and the Cold War. It can now disregard it only at its own expense.

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration's repeated attacks on Europe, with targets ranging from

individual leaders to the European Union as such, are no doubt very problematic. They are inflicting nearly irreparable damage to a successful Atlantic Alliance that has never ceased to deliver for America and its European allies.

It is worth noting, however, that MAGA's dislike for Europe has various themes. European “freeloading” is certainly one. But there is also a frustration with “European weakness.” Hence, the Trump administration's support for European nationalist parties, which it views as the last line of defense against what it describes as “civilizational erasure.”

European mainstream leaders can prove American conservatives wrong by showing that majorities across the continent believe that Europe's internal and external challenges, including the preservation of the “European way of life,” are best addressed through deeper European integration. In other words, the response to European weakness is not the revival of European nationalisms, but a stronger EU.

For their part, however, European advocates of a strong Europe should define “strategic autonomy” – a concept first introduced in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, before Trump's rise to the presidency – with care. If strategic autonomy means enabling Europe to defend itself without America's assistance and to play an influential role in world affairs, it is not merely a legitimate aspiration but an urgent imperative. But to equate European autonomy with anti-Americanism, or with neutrality between America and China, would be strategically unsound.

Seeking equidistance between the world's two largest centers of power may be tempting at this time of great power rivalry, but is on the whole unrealistic. Europe remains so integrated into the transatlantic economy – still the largest in the world – and, like the US would have so much to lose from a China-dominated world, that its strategic camp is effectively pre-set.

So, it is one thing for Europe to de-risk from the US and build its own strategic edge by developing military strength, enhancing the competitiveness of European industry, and accelerating European technological innovation to keep pace with American and Chinese advances. It is quite another to pursue non-alignment – or even strategic estrangement – instead of investing in a more balanced transatlantic relationship.

## Which West?

While the strategic case for transatlantic cooperation is fairly straightforward, the picture becomes more complex when one turns to societal and political questions. The illiberal tendencies currently cutting across America have become cause for grave concern to all those, inside or outside the USA, who care about the future of American democracy. Europeans, moreover, are increasingly alarmed by Washington's open disregard for international norms that America played a central role in creating.

It would be misleading, however, to interpret these worrying developments as evidence of a transatlantic rupture. Rather, the whole West is going through >



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“ While it is rightly noted that MAGA may outlast Trump, America First may in the future disavow the morally unscrupulous and increasingly despotic methods of the current US administration.”

Washington, DC, US, 8 May 2025, Vice President JD Vance attends an event in the East room at the White House.

a “crisis of liberalism,” the symptoms of which are currently more acute in the USA but whose germs have long infected the European political body too, with illiberal tendencies going hand in hand with various forms of populism even on the European continent.

Looking ahead, many are therefore asking whether the liberal West can withstand the current populist-nationalist tide or if a transformation toward an “illiberal West” will eventually prove unavoidable – one that would revive many features of the pre-modern transatlantic order: ethnically and religiously defined, intensely nationalistic, largely undemocratic, and deeply divided. While certainly capturing the stakes involved, such framing overlooks a third, less extreme scenario: the emergence of a “post-liberal” West as a middle course between liberal revival and illiberal regression. In fact, an honest analysis easily unveils that Western societies have already started updating their thinking in ways that recalibrate, rather than repudiate,

the traditional “liberal creed”. This evolution is most evident in the socio-economic sphere, but it may soon extend into other domains, reshaping the identity of the West. Whether or not it culminates in a new transatlantic synthesis, it reflects an emerging reality whose significance should not be underestimated.

### Post-Liberal Corrections

The mixed consequences of globalization have already led to several corrections to economic liberalism. One is the call for fair, rather than free, trade. Current transatlantic discrepancies should not obscure the underlying shift away from the free-trade euphoria of the post-Cold War era. While President Trump has weaponized trade, imposing tariffs and renegotiating various agreements, the EU has recently concluded ambitious trade deals with a number of actors, including India and Latin America. The EU’s proactive trade agenda, however, is not immune to the type of domestic pressures seen

across the Atlantic. Accordingly, new agreements are now more scrutinized than in the past for their economic, social, and security implications.

A second connected set of corrections has to do with de-risking, especially when it comes to China, and a renewed recognition of manufacturing as a critical pillar of both economic growth and economic security. While recently re-engaging with Beijing as a response to transatlantic tensions, European countries (and Canada) remain acutely aware of the downsides stemming from opening their markets to a non-reciprocating China, or overly depending on China-dominated supply chains.

While Europeans cannot afford to dispense with China, which remains a key market for European exports and an essential partner on global challenges such as climate change, the European pendulum has nonetheless been swinging towards managed competition rather than open-ended cooperation. In this respect, starting with the

first Trump presidency, Washington has played a key role in changing European views of China for good.

Another important correction has to do with migration and multiculturalism. On these complex and divisive subjects, the pendulum has clearly swung in the direction of a more cautious approach, based on the recognition that the social consequences of both have been vastly underestimated.

While most Europeans regard the Trump administration's policy of mass deportations as morally unacceptable, both sides of the Atlantic are moving toward a more selective approach to openness – one that welcomes migration only insofar as it preserves social cohesion and safeguards national security. And as Western societies anticipate demographic decline, citizens on both sides of the Atlantic fret about the fate of Western values in a multicultural and multiethnic environment for the same reason.

On issues such as the energy transition and the environment, where transatlantic disconnect is on display, there is more than meets the eye. The Trump administration has scandalously rejected climate science and encouraged an unconstrained use of fossil fuels. Europe, for its part, continues to see itself as a global environmental leader, pursuing climate neutrality by 2050.

Yet, around sustainability and the green transition, there is a detectable transatlantic shift towards limiting foreign dependencies and avoiding self-imposed economic costs. European countries are seriously discussing civilian nuclear energy – which was anathema until recently in many national contexts. The EU is already recalibrating its 2019 signature “Green Deal” by allowing more flexible standards and extended deadlines in an effort to ease the burden on

key industries, foremost among them the struggling automotive sector.

## The Uncertain Future of the Reactionary International

Moving from economics to politics, the West remains very much in transition. Transatlantic societies continue to exhibit deep polarization, including over fundamental principles, and democratic backsliding is evident in a range of contexts, not only in Trump's America. Yet one factor that may favor the emergence of a post-liberal rather than an illiberal West is the uncertain political prospects of anti-liberal leaders, particularly the most uncompromising among them, from the US to Hungary.

Less than two years into his second term, President Trump has already become deeply unpopular. While sowing discord among the American people, recently his support has even eroded within his own base, largely as a result of his increasingly controversial and extreme positions.

While it is rightly noted that MAGA may outlast Trump, America First may in the future disavow the morally unscrupulous and increasingly despotic methods of the current US administration. In this respect, the November midterm elections are rightly seen as a critical test not just for the Democrats, who are hoping to gain back control of the US Congress, but for the future of American conservatism and the course of American democracy.

President Trump's brand of illiberal and confrontational populism has also become increasingly toxic around the world, including in countries where nationalist conservative sentiments run strong, including the UK and several states in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, European populist-nationalist leaders have demonstrated a capacity for adaptation, distancing

themselves from MAGA conservatism and moderating their positions when politically expedient, as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has exemplified in Italy. Virtually none now campaign on leaving the EU, despite President Trump's evident hostility toward it, as many did in the years preceding Brexit.

In this respect, the recent Hungarian elections are hopefully the signal of a broader trend. While the precise agenda of the new leadership will become clearer in the months ahead, there is already a re-engagement with the EU and a commitment to restore democratic standards that had been significantly eroded during the long rule of Viktor Orbán. Orbán was more than a Hungarian populist. He was an early champion of “illiberal democracy” and a leading figure of the “reactionary international,” transforming Hungary into a global hub for sovereigntist movements of various stripes. The significance of his defeat can scarcely be overstated.

While polarization and ideological conflict will likely continue to accompany America and Europe for quite some time, below the surface of transatlantic discord the crisis of liberalism may already be giving way to a reconfigured but enduring West. A plausible long-term outcome may be a post-liberal – but not illiberal – West.

**Emiliano Alessandri** is an International Security Specialist, with a focus on Europe, the transatlantic relationship, and North-South relations. He is an Affiliated Researcher at the oiip and a Visiting Fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the US. He sits on the board of the CSF Foundation and is a Senior Advisor of the Agency for Peacebuilding.

# One Battle After Another:

## A US Game of Supplier Whac-a-Mole and Chinese Energy Resilience

by Thomas Eder



“ US conservative foreign policy elites, including Heritage Foundation experts, had previously complained about China’s exclusive access to sanctioned (and cheap) Venezuelan and Iranian crude.”

Aerial view of oil tankers navigating in the blocked Strait of Hormuz.



## “China may weather a Hormuz disruption better than others, thanks to decades of preparation – offering valuable lessons for Europe.”

Following failed peace talks with Iran in Islamabad, US President Trump announced in April 2026 that the US would blockade the Strait of Hormuz. The US military's Central Command clarified this meant a full blockade of all Iranian ports. This had been preceded by an Iranian blockade of the Strait, where some toll-paying vessels and Iran's own export cargoes could transit. Trump proclaimed that the US Navy would now intercept such ships, presumably including those exporting oil to China. The move aligns with the Trump Administration's demand that Delcy Rodríguez – interim leader of Venezuela since the US military kidnapped President Maduro – must cut her country's energy ties with China, and the US Navy's physical blockade of Venezuela. US conservative foreign policy elites, including Heritage Foundation experts, had previously complained about China's exclusive access to sanctioned (and cheap) Venezuelan and Iranian crude as a supposed indirect subsidy for the Chinese economy. Some argued that higher oil prices could exacerbate China's economic challenges while demonstrations of US control over energy chokepoints could serve as leverage in negotiations with Beijing.

Some effects of an energy price shock on China are evident and concerning. Chinese consumers saw a gradual 30% increase in fuel costs for their vehicles across February–May 2026 – airlines increased fuel surcharges sixfold – despite government adjustments to limit the rise of publicly regulated prices.

After years of Beijing fighting deflation, surging energy prices triggered it with consumer electronics prices reported to be at least 8% higher in mid-April.

However, expectations for the overall expected annual inflation remain low, and Beijing would of course look for inflation driven by demand rather than costs to finally leave the deflation fight behind. The Chinese government had already been worried about lagging household purchasing power – they were just drawing down a consumer goods trade-in subsidy while experimenting with other measures like new childcare subsidies. Meanwhile, fiscal space is limited due to high public debt levels especially on the local level. However, irrespective of the final outcome of the Hormuz crisis, China may still weather this energy storm better than others. It spent the last two decades preparing for the event of some maritime routes being cut off (by the US in a security crisis), and there are already lessons to be learned that European energy security debates can draw on.

Firstly, the full impact of the current crisis on the Chinese economy is moderated and delayed by China having built up the world's largest strategic and commercial crude oil reserves. Overall, reserves stand between 1.2 and 1.5 billion barrels of oil. Beijing will draw on strategic government stockpiles and has reportedly authorized state-owned companies to tap commercial reserves (about 850 million barrels). The supposedly planned drawdown of one million

barrels per day from March through June would leave a significant part of the reserves untouched. The strategic stockpiles could thus gain China several months of breathing space, while Chinese domestic consumption remains covered. Given China's additional stockpiles of refined oil products, plastics precursors and plastics, as well as some reductions in output by plastics and chemicals producers, China could actually stretch those months of breathing space much further.

A second crucial point is that China's industrial machine, electricity system and overall energy security are still largely linked to coal, not gas or oil. According to different statistics, coal still took a 51%–60% share in China's energy mix from 2023 to 2025. Chinese leaders have only gradually reduced that share over the last decades. Coal consumption and the commissioning of new coal power capacity have even rebounded since 2022. This followed a domestic energy crisis in 2021 during the COVID pandemic that involved several blackouts and led to a further strengthened focus on energy security. Meanwhile, much of China's coal power generating capacity stands idle, and it could ramp up output considerably if required. Enormous domestic coal reserves and production cover most of China's needs, while imports are diversified and not vulnerable to maritime chokepoints.

A third factor buffering the Strait of Hormuz crisis' impact on China is its astounding buildup of renewables and popularization of electric vehicles.

Shanghai, China.



Photo: © shutterstock

China is respectively the world's number one producer of hydropower, wind power, solar power, and electricity from biofuels. More than 30% of its electricity is produced through these sources. Since solar power in China has reached cost parity with coal (and looks to improve further), rapid expansion will continue despite subsidies having ended. Meanwhile, China is only in the early stages of exploiting its offshore wind power potential and is building the world's largest hydroelectric power station in Tibet. In addition to renewables, China is on course to overtake France in 2026 and the US in 2030 to become the number one nuclear energy producer. The emerging "electro-state" also includes 40%–50% of new car sales and already about 10% of the overall car fleet being electric vehicles. Meanwhile, electric motorcycles

and scooters dominate the enormous overall two-wheeler fleet. Currently, Chinese manufacturers are already reaping a windfall from the Strait of Hormuz closure, as electric vehicle sales in Southeast Asia have jumped.

Fourthly, China has hastened the expansion of domestic gas production since 2017 and domestic oil production since 2019. It ranks as the global number six in crude oil extraction and number four in gas production, still requiring massive imports because of its enormous industry and population. China has benefited from the shale gas revolution, helping it to supply around 60% of its own gas needs. On the back of an offshore boom, success with new tertiary recovery methods like injecting steam, gas or chemicals to maximize oil field output, and emerging

shale oil gains, domestic production also covers almost 30% of China's oil supply. Meanwhile, China's oil demand is expected to plateau until 2030 (and perhaps peak earlier), and gas demand to peak around 2035, due to slowing growth and the shift to electric vehicles.

In a fifth measure reducing exposure to an oil and gas chokepoint crisis, China diversified its oil and gas supplier base and funded overland pipeline construction. China managed to complete some of the longest pipelines worldwide with Central Asian partners Kazakhstan (oil) and Turkmenistan (gas) in the 2000s and later expanded networks and throughput significantly. In the following decade, major oil and gas pipelines between Russia and China were inaugurated; and the Far Eastern route gas pipeline (with rather

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# “ Europe is moving away from oil and gas import vulnerabilities and dependencies over the next decades. The above lessons can help make this process as quick, painless and sovereign as possible.”

small volumes) from Sakhalin to China is slated to come online in 2027. China built strong maritime import relationships with producers outside the Middle East like Australia, Angola and Brazil. Enormous flows of Chinese foreign direct investment and various kinds of loans were dedicated to oil and gas production and supply agreements. In some cases, like Venezuela, China agreed for unrelated loans to be paid back in oil shipments. In others, like Russia, China agreed to pre-finance pipelines and be paid back in oil or gas. Overall, China aimed to not draw on any supplier for more than 15%–20% of its imports.

China's energy security efforts hold lessons for others, but it remains reasonably exposed and affected by the crisis, driving additional measures likely to be implemented in 2026. In 2025, 45%–50% of China's oil imports and about 15% of its overall gas imports (30% of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports) went through the Strait of Hormuz. Beijing has restricted fuel exports and is likely to consider measures to reduce oil and gas consumption, rather than paying much more on global spot markets. China also aims to support rerouting Saudi and Emirati oil supplies in order to avoid the Strait of Hormuz. Should the disruption persist, Beijing could become more definitively supportive of the proposed Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline from Russia, although Russia's share in China's gas imports already stood at more than 20% in 2024/2025. A possible alternative or balancing addition would be Line D of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline network from Turkmenistan. China's main conclusion

from the crisis, however, is to accelerate the shift to domestic sources. This includes the shift to the “electro-state” (renewables, nuclear, storage, and long-distance transmission), a stagnating drawdown on coal, and expanded unconventional oil and gas production.

The EU and its member states can learn a lot from China's efforts on strategic energy autonomy and energy security. Several major powers may (initiate crises that) cut off Europe's access to (suppliers of) key resources; risks are soaring, and countermeasures remain insufficient. Europe's strategic and commercial crude stockpiles, but also stockpiles of various critical raw materials, should be expanded more quickly to allow for tiding over a short-term crisis while limiting the impact on industrial output and consumers' wallets. Current plans should be reviewed and strengthened. While renewable energy production and storage capacity growth should be accelerated, long-distance and cross-border power transmission infrastructure development can no longer lag. A phase-out of nuclear energy is not (yet) compatible with reducing Europe's greenhouse gas emissions and improving its energy security.

On its target of lower emissions, Europe should focus on overall reductions and prioritize drawing down on imported sources such as oil and gas. This may allow for a somewhat longer-lasting use of coal to improve energy security. Europe should focus further on a shift to domestic sources and capabilities – including on critical raw materials – which includes maximizing European

oil and gas output through unconventional means and in the safest way possible. Implications for energy security are only one reason why outsourcing environmental damage to developing countries cannot be the way forward. Additionally, the EU and its member states should more aggressively pursue diversification, including towards African and Latin American suppliers, as well as those in the neighborhood that can supply the EU without going through maritime chokepoints or hostile transit countries. No country should supply more than 15%–20% of Europe's oil or gas. Returning to large-scale European financing of the Russian military is not an option, dependence on the US is shortsighted, and dependence on individual maritime chokepoints means vulnerability to energy shocks. Europe is moving away from oil and gas import vulnerabilities and dependencies over the next decades. The above lessons can help make this process as quick, painless and sovereign as possible.

**Thomas Eder** is a Research Fellow at the oiip. His research interests include China's foreign, security and international law policy, major power relations, global governance, open strategic autonomy, nuclear non-proliferation, and conflict resolution. Before joining the oiip, he worked at MERICS, the Universities of Vienna and Hong Kong, and the Austrian Foreign Ministry. He was educated in Vienna, Beijing and Hong Kong, was a guest scholar at the NYU and Academia Sinica, and a fellow at the IWM Vienna and at CHOICE in Prague.



# The Shift to a New Global Order:

## Companies and the European Union's Rising Geopolitical Muscle

by Johannes Leitner & Hannes Meissner

**A**long with geopolitical rivalry, the global economy increasingly turns into a battlefield. The US, China, and the EU are designing geoeconomic strategies which aim to exploit chokepoints to push through their own national interests. A recent example of how EU-based companies can get into the crossfire of the US-China conflict is the Dutch semiconductor company ASML. Technologically, ASML is one of the most advanced companies in the field of lithography, which is needed to produce cutting-edge computer chips needed for AI applications. The US has been aiming to contain China's ability to design and produce the latest-generation semiconductors and therefore imposed export restrictions on any technology that supports China's capabilities. Due to the US' extraterritorial impact of their policies, ASML had to substantially reduce its sales into China, which accounted for almost 36% of its total sales in 2024. >



“ The speed and scope of the EU’s sanctions response following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine demonstrated a growing ability to coordinate and deploy powerful economic measures under acute pressure.”

Another example refers to the German automotive industry which was hit by China’s export controls on rare earths and which negatively affected the supply chains of companies such as Mercedes, BMW, and Volkswagen.

The way the global economy works has fundamentally changed. For decades, companies operated in an environment where efficiency, scale, and cross-border integration were the main priorities. Today, economic relations are increasingly shaped by security considerations and power politics. This is no longer abstract geopolitics. It shows up in very tangible ways: sanctions, export controls, investment screening, forced supply chain adjustments, and targeted market disruptions used to influence political outcomes.

In this environment, companies are not bystanders. They are the channels through which economic pressure is applied and the first places where geopolitical risk materializes. Strategic decisions around sourcing, technology, capital allocation, and market access can now trigger regulatory intervention or become leverage points in international disputes. A little later than other

huge economic actors, the European Union has reacted to this reality in its own way. Rather than relying on centralized, coercive state power, the EU primarily uses legal, regulatory, and market-based instruments to defend its interests. This approach is becoming more assertive as the pressure increases. External powers such as the US and China are more frequently targeting EU member states and sectors, deliberately exploiting Europe’s dependencies on critical inputs, advanced technologies, energy systems, and access to foreign markets.

At the same time, the EU has shown that it can act decisively when needed. The speed and scope of the EU’s sanctions response following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine demonstrated a growing ability to coordinate and deploy powerful economic measures under acute pressure. This leads to a simple but far-reaching conclusion: Europe’s geopolitical strength is now exercised largely through companies. Firms are expected to implement complex economic security rules, redesign supply chains for resilience, prevent sensitive technologies from flowing to the wrong actors, and absorb the financial and operational costs of geopolitical realignment. EU economic coercion tools are therefore not just instruments of foreign policy. Instead, they directly shape corporate strategy, investment decisions, governance structures, and long-term competitiveness.

### The EU’s Coercion Instruments Operate Through Corporate Behavior

Firms are compliance infrastructures, which means any regulation which is introduced by lawmakers with relevance to private business is exerted through firms. Sanctions, export controls, subsidy disciplines, and procurement restrictions are implemented by companies

# “The global economy is increasingly driven by security and geopolitics rather than efficiency alone.”

through screening, licensing, contracting, and reporting systems. By doing so, private companies are becoming the vein through which the EU's coercion instruments work. This expands the corporate governance perimeter into geoeconomic enforcement.

In addition to the above, firms are owners of strategic assets and vulnerabilities. Companies operating critical infrastructure, controlling key technologies, or anchoring supply chains become focal points of state security logic. This is especially pronounced in sectors such as semiconductors, digital infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, energy systems, and logistics. In this context the European banking industry is another good example. European authorities keep a close eye on financial institutions when it comes to securing sanctions compliance. This is because banks do manage the financial streams and flows which help or avoid circumventing sanctions. Additionally, the European company SWIFT, which runs the worldwide financial information system, is a critical player when it comes to enforcing sanctions and putting Russian banks into trouble once SWIFT was prohibited from offering its services to Russian financial institutions. Constructing a viable alternative to SWIFT is costly and needs time which makes it a perfect chokepoint.

Third, firms are geopolitical actors, often unintentionally. Their choices about sourcing, investment location, technology collaboration, and data governance can shift dependencies

and alter the effectiveness of coercion. In a fragmented economy, resilience choices become power choices. Efforts to reduce these vulnerabilities have produced only limited results. In Germany, under the Scholz government, de-risking from China proved difficult to implement, as ministries disagreed on both its meaning and execution, while major German corporations effectively weakened the initiative by further expanding their engagement with China. By contrast, de-risking from the United States – described by incoming Chancellor Friedrich Merz on election night as an “absolute priority” – appears to be an even more challenging undertaking. Its political sensitivity and complexity were such that it was ultimately omitted entirely from the coalition agreement.

Again, companies are frequently caught in the crossfire over conflicting interests between political actors. And sometimes, firms follow their own, corporate foreign policy which might contradict the official position of the country vis-à-vis a third country.

## Weaponized Interdependence and Economic Nationalism

Two main approaches highlight the EU's recent developments in strengthening its geopolitical muscle: The first is weaponized interdependence, which highlights how highly centralized networks in finance, information, and technology create chokepoints that can be repurposed for coercion. In this view, states capable of asserting

authority over pivotal nodes, such as payment infrastructures, industry standards, key technologies, and platform governance, can extract leverage by exclusion, restriction, or conditional access. The consequence is a world of offense-defense dynamics in economic networks, rather than a neutral arena of market exchange. The second is the resurgence of economic nationalism, in which industrial policy is increasingly justified through national (or collective) security objectives. Across major powers, industrial strategy and security are converging around technological leadership, supply chain resilience, and control of strategic sectors. The EU's approach is often referred to as less coercive than that of the United States or China, balancing openness with strategic autonomy. However, it is clearly moving toward a security-in-flected economic governance model.

For companies, the implication is structural as corporate decisions must reconcile two competing logics, i.e. global efficiency and political-security constraints. Firms become both objects of policy (regulated, screened, restricted) and instruments of policy (expected to enforce sanctions, comply with export controls, and operationalize resilience).

## The EU's Economic Coercion Toolkit: From Deterrence to Countermeasures

The EU's economic coercion toolkit has expanded rapidly. Its instruments differ in function: some deter coercion, some

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# “Public procurement is a major lever in the EU’s geoeconomic repertoire.”

retaliate, and others reduce vulnerability by shaping market structure. Together, they form a layered architecture of detection, attribution, escalation management, and economic response.

## Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI): A Rules-Based Retaliatory Framework

The EU’s flagship response to coercion is the Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI), established as a framework to protect the Union and member states from economic coercion by third countries. It defines coercion as pressure exerted through trade or investment measures intended to force policy change, and it sets out procedures for EU assessment and response, including the possibility of countermeasures affecting trade, services, investment, or procurement. The ACI is designed primarily to deter and obtain cessation of coercion, with countermeasures framed as a last resort. In effect, this means that if a third country imposes economic measures (tariffs, sanctions, blocking market access, etc.) on an EU member country, the EU can rightfully impose countering activities on the third country. In 2021, Lithuania was experiencing high economic pressure from China because Lithuania announced deepening its ties with Taiwan. Shortly after, Lithuanian firms reported problems renewing contracts with their Chinese customers, seeing their shipments being processed with delay in China and experiencing increasing red tape.

Analytically, the ACI matters because it attempts to solve a credibility problem common to regulatory powers: deterrence requires believ-

able willingness to act. The ACI creates a legalized pathway from identification to response, potentially shortening the gap between coercion and EU action relative to slower multilateral dispute settlement. For companies, the ACI is double-edged: it can protect EU interests, yet countermeasures may disrupt supply chains, market access, and contracting if sectors become targets of EU retaliation.

## Blocking Statute: Countering Extraterritorial Sanctions Pressure

A second coercion-relevant instrument is the EU Blocking Statute, aimed at protecting EU operators from the extraterritorial application of certain third-country laws. The instrument seeks to nullify the effect of specified foreign judgments within the EU, enable recovery of damages, and prohibit compliance with listed extraterritorial measures unless authorized. This addresses a key mechanism of coercion: forcing firms to choose between conflicting legal regimes.

In practice, the Blocking Statute illustrates the EU’s structural dilemma: it can legislate constraints on corporate compliance behavior, but firms’ risk calculations are shaped by exposure to foreign enforcement and market dependence. The statute therefore works less as an absolute shield than as a governance signal, asserting EU legal sovereignty while exposing the need for stronger operational mechanisms to sustain corporate resistance under pressure. When President Trump re-introduced economic sanctions

against Iran during his first presidency, the EU ruled that its companies must not follow the US sanctions against Iran. Theoretically a powerful instrument, it partially failed in practice due to the US de-facto power, which the EU could not stand up to.

## International Procurement Instrument (IPI): Market Access as Leverage

Public procurement is a major lever in the EU’s geoeconomic repertoire. The International Procurement Instrument (IPI) aims to improve reciprocal access to procurement markets by enabling the EU to investigate restrictive third-country practices and, if needed, to impose measures limiting access of third-country goods, services, or operators to EU procurement. This turns procurement openness into conditionality in that market access becomes a bargaining instrument. In 2024 the EU conducted an investigation into EU medical devices market access in China to determine whether China applied policies to the disadvantage of EU suppliers. Subsequent to the investigation which confirmed uneven treatment of EU suppliers, the EU introduced measures to restrict market access for Chinese firms thus trying to incentivize China to abolish their discriminatory policies versus EU firms.

For companies, IPI-style leverage has two strategic effects. First, it can protect EU firms from discriminatory foreign procurement regimes by creating credible negotiation pressure. Second, it increases compliance complexity for contracting authorities and bidders, potentially altering competitive dynamics in sectors where third-country

“Companies are no longer bystanders in geopolitics – they have become the frontline where economic power, and political conflict intersect.”



Photo: © shutterstock

suppliers play a major role. Either way, companies become the operational interface of coercion policy through eligibility, sourcing, and tender strategy.

### Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR): Disciplining State-Backed Competition

Economic coercion often works indirectly through subsidized market capture and dependency creation. The Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR) addresses distortions caused by subsidies granted by non-EU governments by empowering the Commission to investigate and remedy distortive financial contributions affecting the Single Market, including in acquisitions and public procurement contexts. It closes a regulatory gap: EU state aid is scrutinized, while foreign subsidies previously were not.

From a coercion perspective, the FSR is not retaliation, but prevention: it reduces vulnerability created by strategic subsidization that can hollow out domestic capacity or lock in dependence. For firms, the FSR introduces

new transaction and tender risks, reshaping due diligence and disclosure requirements and integrating economic security into competition and procurement compliance. In 2024 the EU initiated an inquiry into foreign subsidies of wind turbine companies facilitating wind farms in Europe. The inquiry led to an in-depth investigation starting in February 2026. The final outcome of the investigation is not yet clear, but at least the EU shows it takes economic coercion seriously.

The EU has rightly started to equip itself with the tools needed in today's global economic reality which is increasingly characterized by fragmentation and trade conflicts. Their effectiveness, however, still needs to be proven as most of these tools have only been introduced recently. Their effectiveness will not only depend on the design of the instruments, but also on the EU's willingness and power to enforce them even under the effect of countermeasures which might similarly hurt certain European industries or companies and thus provoke lobbying against the EU's geoeconomic tools.

**Johannes Leitner** is an Affiliated Researcher at the oiip. He is the co-founder and Managing Partner at LM Political Risk and Strategy Advisory in Vienna, with over 15 years of expertise in geostrategy, trade compliance, geo/political risk management, and global business strategy. He serves as the Academic Director of the EMBA program in International Management at the University of Applied Sciences for Economy, Management, and Finance in Vienna, and is on the board of the Political Risk Studies Association (PRSA).

**Hannes Meissner** is a Political Scientist specializing in political risk analysis, trade compliance, and political risk management for multinational corporations, with a focus on Eastern Europe, Russia, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. He is the Managing Partner of LM Political Risk and Strategy Advisory GmbH. In academia, he is an expert on (geo)political risks in Eastern Europe and a member of the Eastern Europe Research Group at the University of Vienna. He is also associated with the University of Gothenburg in the V-Dem Project, where he serves as a country expert for Turkmenistan.



# Comrade Donald?

## MAGA as the Great Misdirected Class Struggle

by Johannes Späth

Tempe, Arizona, US,  
24 October 2024:  
Trump Campaign Rally.

“In the twenty-something years that I’ve been covering politics, I have never seen them [top Democrats] so confused” – Ezra Klein, New York Times. How did it happen that the Democratic Party could lose so decisively in 2024 to a candidate burdened by more scandals than can be counted and openly hostile to democratic norms?

Thankfully, there are plenty of external factors to point towards that seemingly exonerate the Democratic Party from this utterly humiliating defeat against the arguably biggest con man in American history:

First, high rates of inflation due to the Covid pandemic gave every incumbent globally a hard time. Second, due to prevailing racism and sexism America just was not ready for a non-white woman as president. Finally,

the refusal of Joe Biden to drop out earlier in the race left the Democrats with no choice but to run a mediocre presidential campaign. And, if those explanations were not enough, there is always the elitist fallback: the idea that millions of Trump supporters in the Heartland are “deplorables” and simply cannot grasp the “shining light” of high-minded Democratic principles.

Unfortunately for Democratic strategists, there is a much less fatalistic and deterministic reading of this defeat: Democrats were just emphasizing the wrong issues and had a weak policy platform to campaign for. As this article will demonstrate, the MAGA movement’s success is a symptom of a misdirected class struggle. The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change. The success of the

MAGA movement is best understood not as a rejection of left-wing politics in general, but as a misdirected form of class politics. The opportunity for the Left lies in reclaiming that terrain.

Data from the election tells a clear story of economic desperation. Exit polls showed voters who prioritized “democracy” or “character” went for Harris by nearly 80%, but those who prioritized “the economy” (the much larger group) went for Trump by a similar margin. Data from Blue Rose Research, a Democratic-linked firm, shows that the issues voters cared about most in 2024 were, by a wide margin: “cost of living,” “inflation,” and “the economy.” The data reveals a devastating trend: within these top three priorities, the Republican Party is far more trusted to deliver solutions than the Democrats. In fact, the only issue of moderate importance where Democrats held even a marginal

edge was Healthcare. Meanwhile, the issue they are most trusted with, LGBTQ issues, was ranked the least important of all 36 topics measured.

While, with some justification, political pundits have emphasized the shift of the non-white working class (defined here as those without a college degree) toward Trump between 2020 and 2024, the story is much broader. Low socio-economic status now generally, no matter the ethnicity, correlates positively with Republican support. This is a historic reversal for a group that should form a core constituency of the Democratic Party or the Left more broadly. Moreover, another group marked by

economic anxiety, young people, also shifted toward Trump in relative terms compared to older cohorts.

Economic desperation and pauperization are a bleak reality for many Americans. While specific metrics vary by institution, the prevailing data indicates a systemic state of financial fragility for a near-majority of Americans. Current economic indicators suggest approximately half of the population lives paycheck-to-paycheck, meaning that they cannot afford an unexpected expense of 500 dollars or more. Moreover, nearly a quarter of US households are spending more than 95% of their income on essentials. A national West Health-Gallup survey

found 11% of Americans, about 28 million people, said that they skipped meals to afford healthcare in the past year.

Of course, objectively, it is not advisable for anyone living on or below the line of poverty to vote Republican. The Democratic Party still has, out of a set of two poor choices, better economic policies for the majority. Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration is currently pursuing economic policies aimed at the ultra-rich at the expense of the already destitute – cutting healthcare subsidies for the poorest in order to offset tax cuts for the affluent. However, politics is not a theoretical model of how the hyper-rational homo oeconomicus would vote in their interest. Voters do >

“ The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change.”

Huntington Beach,  
California, US.



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Comrade Donald?

Lake Oswego, Oregon, US, 4 May 2021.

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## “ The lesson for Europe is as urgent as it is obvious: the “Barricade of Values”, the strategy of centering elections on the defense of democracy and liberal norms, is a failing shield against the sword of economic anxiety.”

not evaluate platforms as economists. They respond to signals, narratives, and perceived intent. The question is not which policy is objectively better, but which candidate appears to be genuinely fighting for them.

The argument presented here is that Trump was more successful in convincing the average American that he would be acting in their interest by centralizing the message of economic change. If we look at the MAGA platform in a superficial way, as most voters would do, arguably there are four to five main promises or proposals: the stopping of all irregular migration and the biggest deportation in history, tariffs and protectionism, stopping inflation, no tax on tips and the slashing of environmental regulations in order to get oil and petrol as cheap

as possible. Whatever their economic coherence, Trump’s proposals shared a crucial political feature: they were legible as immediate material relief. Deportations signalled reduced labor competition for low-wage environments; tariffs promised the return and conservation of jobs; rhetoric on inflation acknowledged the central anxiety of everyday life and attacks on regulation implied cheaper energy. To many voters, these were not abstract policies but concrete signals: someone is trying to improve my situation now.

In fairness, the Harris campaign also had some economic proposals superficially aimed at economic relief for the majority but it was way too little overall and de-emphasized towards the end of her campaign. Harris’ flagship economic policies for the majority

were: \$50,000 mortgage assistance for first-time home buyers, no tax on tips, and a potential \$50,000 tax cut for newly founded small businesses. The Democratic platform was a collection of “boutique” policies. \$50,000 for the aspiring homeowner here, \$50,000 for the tech startup founder there. While these policies look superficially promising, they collectively reach less than 2% of the population in a given year. For the other 98%, who are watching the price of eggs double while their wages stagnate, these “opportunity economy” measures felt less like a helping hand and more like a rewards program for a class they may not belong to.

The result was a perception problem: while Trump promised disruption, Democrats appeared to offer minuscule calibration. More to the point, the internal Harris campaign data reveals that her best performing ads were those that raised the issues of economic desperation, inflation and the affordability crisis. Yet, the Democratic strategists made the curious decision to pivot the campaign away from the initially dominant economic angle towards centralizing the danger to democracy

## “The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change.”

stemming from Trump. This pivot is well documented by longitudinal content analysis of Harris' speeches throughout the campaign. It truly is a puzzling decision, given the fact that internal analysis must have shown the same facts that public data on the election now clearly demonstrates: 78% of Americans indicated that it is more important right now to “deliver change that improves Americans' lives” than is “preserving of America's institutions.” Moreover, 53% of Americans agreed with the statement that “Things in America are going poorly and what is needed is a major change and a shock to the system from whoever becomes President.” In a populist era, a candidate who promises a “shock to the system” (mass deportations, universal tariffs) is communicating a scale of change that feels equal to the scale of the voter's desperation. Protectionism and deportation are blunt instruments that the working class understands as “putting me first.” This translates to America First in foreign policy. The Democratic platform of institutional stability sounds to a pauperized voter like protecting the system that has presided over their decline.

There is a tragic absurdity in the fact that while a majority of the electorate was signalling for a “shock to the system,” the Left offered a status quo campaign and then expressed bewilderment when the voters chose the only candidate who brought a sledgehammer. In the aftermath of the election result, Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders captured the sentiment best: “It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working-class people would find that the working class has abandoned them.”

The data on the election does not tell a story of inevitability. Quite to the contrary, it tells a story of a mismatch between the needs of the electorate and the policy platform of the losing

party. There is hope in this perspective. With the right economic policies, aimed at an immediate and direct betterment of the majority of the population and the centrality of the message of true and genuine economic reform, the Left can win back parts of its core constituency and slay the ugly monster of right-wing populism. Zohran Mamdani, current Democratic Mayor of New York City, demonstrated that feat: by focusing his campaign on “bread and butter” issues like rent, affordability, and groceries, he managed to flip 30% of the districts that voted for Trump only a year prior in the presidential election. In a similar vein, the 2026 rise of Marine veteran and oyster farmer Graham Platner in the Maine Democratic Senate primary proved the power of a raw, anti-corporate message. By explicitly campaigning to dismantle what he termed the “billionaire economy” and targeting private equity's stranglehold on everyday life, Platner built an insurmountable lead over the party's centrist, establishment favorite by offering tangible economic relief rather than elite warnings about institutional continuity.

There is a lesson here for European countries, who struggle with their own class revolts expressed through right-wing populism. The lesson for Europe is as urgent as it is obvious: the “Barricade of Values”, the strategy of centering elections on the defense of democracy and liberal norms, is a failing shield against the sword of economic anxiety. In Germany, the SPD's historic 2025 collapse proved that

voters will not accept “stability” if that stability feels like managed decline. In France and the UK, the dynamic is not fundamentally different: as the Left shifts away from broad, material claims toward narrower, segmented appeals, it creates a vacuum in which the far-right becomes the only actor articulating economic grievance in clear and universal terms. Right-wing populism is not an intellectual failure of the masses; it is a service-level failure of those parties supposedly representing the working class. The lesson is not that economic populism is inherently right-wing. It is that it is politically powerful and currently underutilized by the Left. The demand for a “shock to the system” is real and will not disappear overnight. The only open question is who will define and shape it. A progressive politics that centers material improvement, speaks in universal terms, and matches the scale of voter frustration does not need to fear that demand, rather it can harness it.

**Johannes Späth** is a Research Associate at the oiip. After studying political science with a focus on International Politics in Regensburg and Rome, he completed his Master's degree in Political Science at the University of Vienna. At the oiip, his work focuses on monitoring US governance and policy, alongside research into global autocratization and the ways domestic political pressures shape foreign policy.

# Under Construction: Europe's Economic Repositioning in a Fragmented International Order

by Marie Krpata

**“U**nder Destruction” – this was this year’s motto at the Munich Security Conference. A motto that applies both to security and economy in an increasingly fragile international system. In 2024, Mario Draghi’s report on the EU’s competitiveness rang the alarm bell: Europe is slipping behind the US and China, European companies struggle with Brussels’ bureaucracy, and the internal market is too fragmented. However, two years later only about 15% of his recommendations were implemented: the wake-up call was not heard.

In fact, the situation is getting tougher for the EU as fiscal room is scarce,

and energy costs have been rising. In addition, huge investments are needed in the EU’s defense industry to supply Ukraine with weapons, while investment needs in the digital and energy transitions are also huge. Moreover, the EU, whose economic model is based on free trade, is now confronted with increased protectionism from its main trade partners, with tariffs, export controls, market access restrictions that divert trade flows and restructure value chains. In the past years, the EU has been responding through various strategies, policies and instruments largely focused on increasing the EU’s resilience and reducing one-sided dependencies, thereby reflecting the growing nexus between economy and security.

## Geopolitical Shocks Must Serve as Opportunity for Europe

There seems now to be an understanding of a sense of urgency. The time has come for middle powers to unite, as Canada’s Prime Minister Mark Carney suggested at the World Economic Forum in January 2026. This was echoed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in her speech in Davos. The moment has come to be clear-eyed: “Geopolitical shocks can and must serve as an opportunity for Europe.” An “independent Europe” is now emerging, one that takes action on securing energy, critical raw materials, and defense, and speeding up efforts in the digital realm; one that chooses



“partnership instead of isolation” through free-trade agreements; one that would strive toward the deepening of the internal market so that companies can benefit from the extent of an area gathering 450 million people.

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, in February this year, warned that Europe is facing a “geopolitical and geo-economic state of emergency” and risks being “swept aside” if staying passive to evolutions in the US and China. Europe must reckon with the gravity of the stakes and take action. In line with Ursula von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron insisted on the EU’s assets, such as a predictable regulatory environment where the rule of law applies.

### The EU’s Economic Outlook: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?

The EU’s economic outlook is sobering. This is obvious when looking at the EU’s biggest economy and manufacturing power – Germany. According to Peter Leibinger, the president of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Germany is facing the “deepest crisis since the founding of the Federal Republic.” The chemical industry, the machine tool and steel as well as the automotive industries are facing “a

structural decline” and the fear of deindustrialization is looming. In Germany bad news hits the media every day between crumbling infrastructure, soaring energy prices, layoffs and a skills shortage. Since 2019, the German automotive industry has been hit by 110,000 job losses. The transition from the internal combustion engine toward the electric vehicle (EV), where Chinese car makers are more competitive than their European counterparts, risks driving these figures up even more while German car makers are also considering moving part of their production from Germany to the US to circumvent tariffs put into place by Donald Trump.

As tensions are mounting with the US, including on economic topics, the use of the European “trade bazooka”, the so-called Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI), has been discussed. Notably, ahead of the Turnberry trade deal or amidst the tensions over Greenland. However, countries particularly exposed to the US decided against it, raising questions over the ACI being a mere “paper tiger.” Donald Trump can easily play out Europe’s dependence on US security and defense that gives the US leeway in trade negotiations, while the EU’s energy dependence on the US is also increasing as it transitioned away from Russian energy.

“ The EU tends to reform only when its back is against the wall.”

### The EU Facing the 2<sup>nd</sup> China Shock

China accounts for 35% of the world manufacturing production and the EU is faced with massive exports of Chinese overcapacities. Moreover, the Renminbi’s undervaluation further decreases the competitiveness of European products as compared to Chinese products. The EU’s bilateral trade deficit ballooned to over €350 bn in 2025. In the past decades, China had been benefiting from technological transfer from Western companies which concluded joint venture (JV) agreements with Chinese companies to get access to the Chinese market. >

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UNDER CONSTRUCTION



Photo: © shutterstock

Guangzhou, Guangdong, China:  
26 September 2025: Electric cars are displayed in a showroom at the GAC Aion Intelligent Ecological Factory.

“As long as divisions persist between European capitals, third countries can drive a wedge between them.”

Now that Chinese companies master these technologies, Western companies are squeezed out from China. Increasingly, Chinese products, which are not only cheaper but increasingly also reaching the same quality level – or above – their European counterparts, compete both, with European products on the European market but also on third markets. That is what is considered the second “China shock.”

It is notably the case in the EV sector where Chinese car manufacturers benefited from state subsidies, thereby leading to unfair competition. After an investigation by the European Commission (EC) the EU put into place countervailing duties against these Chinese EV manufacturers. However, discussions over the use of trade defense instruments display divergences among EU member states. Germany, particularly exposed to trade, fears retaliation and therefore was reluctant to sanction Chinese EVs. France, on the contrary, which is less exposed to trade, defends an offensive European approach. In response to the countervailing duties, China hit back, targeting cognac and dairy

products with retaliatory measures, thereby showing it could play out the exposure of European – and more specifically French – sectors to the Chinese market. Beijing also knows how to astutely use its European counterparts’ import-dependence on goods originating from China, for instance critical raw materials or semiconductors, where export restrictions led to shortages causing nervousness within the EU and among European companies.

## The EU’s New Economic Orientations

The saying goes that the EU has proven resolve to reform only with its back against the wall and, in these particularly challenging times, discussions on the way forward have intensified, perhaps helping to advance on key economic areas.

First, the new geoeconomic reality needs to be recognized: trade is increasingly weaponized and dependencies may be used to coerce trade partners and blackmail them. Acknowledging this is already a change in DNA for an EU that believes

in economic liberalism, free trade, international division of labor based on comparative advantages and the availability of factors of production and economic efficiency. Economists, many of whom have doubted this, may need to adapt their view, and confront it with the analyses of political scientists looking at things from another lens.

Second, in some areas where there is consensus processes may be sped up. On the need of simplification of rules applying to European companies there is overall agreement within the EU. There is also convergence on diversification, meaning the multiplication of trading partners to increase the number of suppliers and clients and thereby reduce the EU's dependence on single states such as the US or China. Alternatives and possibilities of substitution are key to avoiding chokepoints and shortages. Trade agreements with Mercosur, India, and Australia were recently finalized.

### Current Discussions on European Preference, the Internal Market, Mergers, Financing...

Third, European preference is now discussed within the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA), which should boost investments, productivity in the industrial sector and the EU's competitiveness. While there is discussion on local content rules and on the scope of "Made in Europe" or "Made with Europe", the IAA should also contain increased conditionality to Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) directed toward the EU including JV requirements, the investor's limitation of capital takeover and of controlling rights and a job guarantee in the EU.

Fourth, deepening the internal market has become a priority. European entrepreneurs face difficulties in securing

funding as the European capital market is too fragmented. The Draghi report criticized that €300 bn of European savings each year fuel the US economy and could be better used to fund companies in Europe. A Savings and Investment Union (SIU) should help companies access capital in the EU. In parallel the "28<sup>th</sup> regime" is discussed: a truly European company structure with a single and simple set of rules facilitating doing business and raising financing seamlessly across Europe just as in uniform markets like the US or China. That would help EU companies grow and attract foreign investment.

Fifth, European merger rules are currently discussed with the prospect of furthering the creation of "European champions" to withstand global competition. For a long time, the EU favored consumer protection and was reluctant to allow mergers. Now the EU's approach is changing: mergers are also considered in the interest of consumers from the perspective of security of critical input supply, enhancing supply-chain resilience. Moreover, mergers enable the mutualization of costs and R&D, accelerate innovation and focus procurement budgets.

Finally, it always comes down to the financing. Mario Draghi evaluates the financing needs at €1 200 bn per year to invest in cleantech, quantum computing and artificial intelligence (AI), the steel, the car and the chemical and defense industries, to ramp-up with the US and China. Berlin, which is reluctant to European debt, points at other Member States' responsibility to improve their public finances. In this controversy, Mario Draghi in 2025, explained that public money is only considered a trigger to leverage private capital. "The more we push reforms, the more private capital will step up – and the less public money we will need."

### Overcoming National Interests to Avoid Divisions

On many of these aspects national interests are in the way, for instance on European preference, Eurobonds or the SIU. Europe does have coordination tools to work on common industrial projects that help achieve scale, such as Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs). But member states spend a greater deal on state aid: In 2023, EU countries spent nearly €190 bn on state aid – five times more than has been allocated to IPCEIs since 2018. A truly European way of thinking would enable to increase synergies among Member States and their industries. As long as divisions persist between European capitals, third countries can drive a wedge between them such as China circumventing countervailing duties against its EV manufacturers. Thinking in terms of European interests could also include the pooling of costs to compensate for asymmetric retaliation from third countries.

Even though there has been great progress on joint strategies, policies and instruments in the economic realm within the EU, there is still room for improvement on the path to integrating a truly European reflex in the interest of a strong EU economy.

**Marie Krpata** is an Affiliated Researcher at the oiip and a Researcher at the French Institute of International Relations, where she focuses primarily on the European Union and the foreign policy of France and Germany, Germany's economy, industrial and trade policy, EU-China relations and economic security. She previously worked, among others, on the German car industry, the EU's industrial strategy and the UE-Mercosur trade deal.

# Learning to Navigate the Geopolitical Storm:

## The First Year of the oiip Academy

by Cengiz Günay & Vedran Džihic

**W**e live in a time when geopolitics has returned to the forefront of international affairs and increasingly affects almost every aspect of our lives and societies.

From wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Iran to the transatlantic rift, fragile supply chains, democratic backsliding, hybrid conflicts, and AI-driven disruptions, the international landscape is undergoing profound change. These developments increasingly shape not only international politics but also business decisions, diplomacy, media work, and civil society engagement.

In such an environment, there is an urgent need to understand geopolitics and adapt to a new era. Geopolitics is no longer a niche expertise reserved for diplomats or academics; rather, it has become a practical necessity for everyone.

It was against this backdrop that we at oiip decided to develop and launch the oiip Academy. The oiip Academy brings the Institute's regional and thematic expertise into executive education

programs. In fall 2025, we launched our first executive education program, titled "How to Navigate Geopolitical Risks." This modular program is designed for professionals from a wide range of fields. It aims to equip participants with both conceptual knowledge and practical skills to develop geopolitical literacy.

The oiip Academy is designed for professionals who need to understand and respond to geopolitical developments in their day-to-day work. By combining expert insights, practical case studies, and interactive learning formats, our programs help participants strengthen their

analytical capabilities and make more informed decisions in an increasingly complex international environment.

What sets the oiip Academy apart is its combination of academic rigor and practical relevance. Drawing on the Institute's extensive regional expertise, policy-oriented research, and international networks, our programs are designed to help participants translate geopolitical analysis into informed decisions and effective strategies in their professional environments.

Our classes are small and interactive. Participants also have the opportunity

“I gained a better understanding of how to approach complex global issues and think more strategically.”

“ The mix of theory and practical application made the learning experience truly engaging and relevant.”

“ I especially valued the interactive exercises and the exchange of expertise between presenters and participants.”

“ The interactive format and discussions made the course dynamic and far from one-dimensional.”

“ The insights into scenario monitoring and horizon scanning were particularly valuable.”

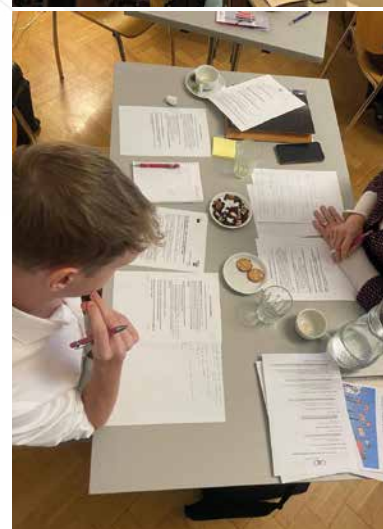
“ The Academy provided concrete tools and frameworks that I can directly apply in my daily work.”

to connect and network with experts and practitioners from around the world.

Over the coming months and years, oiip will further expand its executive education offerings and develop certificate programs in collaboration with universities.

**Stay tuned.** Join us at the Academy and gain firsthand insights and practical tools to navigate new geopolitical and geo-economic uncertainties and uncharted waters with greater clarity, critical thinking, strategic awareness, and foresight.

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# Beyond Soft Power: How Turkish TV Dramas Shape Global Politics

by Ceren Çetinkaya

**T**he ship swayed. The cold waters of the Bosphorus tossed the vessel from side to side as the chained women on deck fixed their eyes on the silhouette rising from the horizon: minarets, domes, smoke, and stone. Istanbul. Alexandra pressed her fingertips against the railing. The wind threw her hair across her face. When the port finally opened up before them, the shouts of men, the cries of gulls, the smell of salt and empire, she turned to the woman beside her, voice low and bitter. "Have we arrived at the Ottoman hell?"

This is the opening scene of *Magnificent Century*, one of the most watched Turkish productions in history, airing in over 60 countries. The show was a turning point for the Turkish television industry, proof that local drama could travel and compete globally. However, it also turned the soap opera genre into a contested medium of history and political power.

The global circulation of Turkish television dramas offers a striking example of the political power of TV series and how their production and circulation is related to international politics.

Today, Turkey ranks third worldwide in TV drama exports, followed by only the United States and the United Kingdom (The Economist, 2024). Between 2020 and 2023 alone, global demand for Turkish dramas surged by 184%, with countries in the MENA region, Balkans, and Eastern Europe among the top importers (Aytaç et al., 2024). In 2024, the Turkish production industry exported over 300 series to more than 200 countries, generating revenues exceeding \$500 million (Duvar English, 2025). Although early TV series productions primarily targeted domestic viewers, by the 2010s Turkish dramas had gained



**Paying attention to how these dramas are produced and how they travel across borders reveals that their global success is not accidental, but shaped through a series of choices that collectively carry macro-level consequences.”**

Istanbul, Turkey.

immense international popularity, prompting producers to look beyond national borders and encouraging state officials to harness this momentum for trade power, public diplomacy, and national identity-building strategies.

Nevertheless, this growing visibility has not been without friction. In some contexts, Turkish dramas have become politically contentious, even leading to bans in certain regions as debates over history and regional influence intensify. In 2018, the Saudi-owned broadcaster MBC pulled all Turkish dramas from its network, coinciding with deepening tensions between Ankara and the Saudi-UAE axis following Turkey's support for Qatar. Meanwhile, Egypt's highest Islamic authority issued a fatwa against Muslims consuming Turkish dramas. These moments reveal that popular culture is never simply entertainment, but rather an important political asset. Paying attention to how these dramas are produced and how they travel across borders reveals that their global success is not accidental, but shaped through a series of choices that collectively carry macro-level consequences.

## Turkish Soap Operas on the World Stage

Turkish television series have become one of the country's most potent cultural exports and a quietly formidable instrument of soft power. According to Forbes Turkey, Turkish drama exports nearly tripled between 2018 and 2024, spanning both traditional

broadcast and digital platforms. Nowhere is this influence more deeply felt than across the MENA region, where cultural familiarity has translated into tangible gains for Turkey's tourism industry and broader economy.

Turkish dramas first arrived in the region in the mid-2000s as a compelling alternative to Western imports, which were perceived as culturally alien to local sensibilities. The breakthrough moment came with *Gümüş*, broadcast across the Arab world as *Noor* on MBC, a melodrama tracing the romance between a wealthy businessman and a young woman caught between modern ambition and traditional expectation. Its success was staggering, opening the floodgates for what would become a sustained cultural wave.

A second wave quickly followed, bringing richer and more varied storytelling. *Binbir Gece* (1001 Nights) drew audiences into a morally charged romance built on sacrifice and desire, while *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) and *Yaprak Dökümü* (The Falling of Leaves) expanded the thematic range while preserving the emotional and moral sensibilities that resonated strongly with Arab viewers. MBC played a pivotal role throughout this period, strategically programming Turkish dramas as content that felt both refreshingly modern and culturally accessible, effectively weaving them into the fabric of Arab media life.

Yet this landscape was far from static. The rise of Ottoman-themed television dramas marked a decisive turning point,

not only in the aesthetic and narrative character of Turkish exports, but in their geopolitical stakes. *Magnificent Century* propelled Turkish historical dramas onto a global stage by combining high production value with a dramatized reimagining of Ottoman imperial history, attracting vast international audiences and sparking debates over historical representation and national identity. The series portrays the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent not through the austere lens of conventional historiography, but through the intimate corridors of the Topkapı Palace: its power struggles, romantic entanglements, and court intrigues. In doing so, it transformed a distant imperial past into a visceral viewing experience, and in the process made TV shows a contested terrain far beyond the borders of Turkey.

A new wave of historical epics followed, grander and far more contested in their interpretations: *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman*. Unlike *Magnificent Century's* focus on palace intrigue and personal drama, these series foregrounded religious symbolism, heroic masculinity, and a civilizational narrative of Ottoman origins, making their political undertones far more explicit. Turkish state institutions began to read, and at times actively promote, these productions as expressions of a renewed national vision.

Behind these productions lies a more complex institutional picture. The major studios behind Turkish historical dramas operate as private commercial >

“As states increasingly use cultural production as a foreign policy tool, struggles over imperial memory will be fought not only in archives and academies, but also on streaming platforms and broadcast schedules.”



Photo: © shutterstock

entities, formally independent of the state. Yet the line between commercial calculation and political alignment has grown increasingly blurred. State broadcaster TRT, by commissioning and co-producing prestige historical epics, shapes both the financial incentives and the narrative frameworks available to producers. At the same time, it would be reductive to cast producers purely as instruments of official ideology: the proven export appetite of MENA and South Asian audiences for epic narratives of Muslim heroism creates its own gravitational pull. The result is a productive ambiguity in which patriotic grandeur and commercial savvy are difficult to disentangle, and producers can credibly present themselves as simply responding to audience demand.

### War of Screens: Geopolitics and Historical Memory

What had once been a story of shared melodrama became, increasingly, a flashpoint for diplomatic friction. Nowhere is this clearer than in Turkey's turbulent relationship with Saudi Arabia. Already strained by sharply divergent responses to the Arab Spring uprisings, the relationship was pushed further to the brink by the 2017 Gulf crisis, when Ankara openly sided with Qatar against the Saudi-led blockade, sending cargo planes loaded with supplies to Doha in a move widely read as a direct challenge to Riyadh's regional authority.

The breaking point came with the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal

Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Rather than pursuing quiet diplomacy, Turkey adopted an unexpectedly assertive strategy: selectively releasing investigative findings to international media, deliberately keeping the story alive in global news cycles and framing the killing as a premeditated, state-directed operation.

It was against this charged backdrop that Saudi Arabia's next move unfolded: not in a diplomatic communique, but in a phone call. In 2018, media professionals across the MBC network were instructed directly by state officials to stop purchasing Turkish content and to pull existing Turkish series from broadcast schedules and digital platforms, leaving visible gaps in libraries that had been built over years. The ban spread quickly. The UAE and other regional broadcasters followed suit, not through formal announcements, but through quiet realignment. As one industry professional put it: "We kept the Turkish content, but in a very discreet way, not with the usual marketing, because we didn't want to trigger hostility in the region." Entertainment, it turned out, was never just entertainment.

MBC Group occupies a dominant position in the regional media landscape and has long been one of the largest buyers of Turkish dramas, contributing significantly to their circulation across the Middle East. Through its extensive satellite network, programming capacity, and control over regional content flows, MBC Group wields substantial power in shaping which cultural products circulate across Arab markets, and when political tensions arise, this power becomes an instrument with clear geopolitical implications. In such contexts, entertainment industries stop being solely commercial domains; they become arenas in which states project narratives, signal alliances, and articulate shifting regional hierarchies.

The ban's eventual lifting was itself a geopolitical signal. Following President

Erdoğan's visit to King Salman in April 2022, and a gradual diplomatic thaw, MBC signed a five-year content agreement with two of Turkey's biggest production companies. No public statement required: the deal spoke for itself.

Yet Saudi Arabia was not the only front in this cultural war. Egypt's fraught relationship with Turkish television stretches back to 2013, when the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and Ankara's vocal condemnation of the military takeover prompted prominent figures in Egypt's artistic community to call for a boycott of Turkish dramas. Some broadcasters temporarily suspended Turkish content, an early sign of how geopolitical disagreements could rapidly translate into pressure on transnational cultural flows.

What had merely simmering tension erupted into something far more ideologically charged with the global success of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. In 2020, Egypt's Global Fatwa Index issued an edict condemning the show, accusing it of functioning as a colonial campaign over former Ottoman domains. Turkish soap operas, the edict argued, were being used to export the idea that Erdoğan and his followers are the rightful leaders of the Islamic world, cloaking material and political ambition in the language of Islamic solidarity. The accusation was striking: a television drama had been recast as an instrument of neo-Ottoman imperialism.

What these two cases reveal, when read together, is that the same cultural texts can carry radically different political meanings depending on where and through what historical lens they are viewed. The Saudi ban was largely a response to contemporary diplomatic tensions, relatively detached from the actual content of the shows. Egypt's reaction, by contrast, zeroed in on the narratives themselves, introducing a colonial register that reframed the entire debate. And yet, as distributors and consumers from both Turkey and

the region noted, beneath the political and ideological rhetoric lay a simpler reality: economic reasoning. Both cases signaled a region increasingly determined to build its own media industries.

That ambition took its most dramatic form in 2019, when the UAE and Egypt co-produced *Kingdoms of Fire*, a lavish historical epic explicitly designed as a counter-narrative to the Ottoman imaginary promoted by Turkish dramas. Aired in the immediate aftermath of the Saudi ban, the production was a direct challenge to Turkey's rising cultural influence and its projection of a particular version of history across the region. Here, television had become something more than entertainment or even soft power; it had become a medium for historical contestation, a way of fighting over memory itself.

Counter-productions like *Kingdoms of Fire* reveal that transnational television can no longer be understood as a purely market-driven phenomenon. These are not simply dramas competing for ratings; they are arguments – about the past, about regional leadership, about whose version of history gets to circulate across Arab living rooms. The involvement of state institutions, religious bodies, media conglomerates, and creative professionals in these struggles points to something that conventional diplomacy often obscures: geopolitical contests are not only waged through summits and sanctions. They also take place in writers' rooms, production studios, and broadcast schedules, by industry workers whose meaning-making practices carry consequences far beyond the screen. The journey from Alexandria's bitter remark at the gates of Istanbul to Egypt's fatwa against *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* is a story about what happens when popular culture becomes too politically legible to ignore. Turkish television dramas did not set out to reshape regional geopolitics. They set out to entertain. Yet the accumulated weight of their choices, which empires

to glorify, which version of Islamic history to center, proved impossible for neighboring states to receive as neutral.

The Saudi and Egyptian cases, distinct in both their triggers and logic, together demonstrate that the same cultural text can function simultaneously as a commercial product, a soft power instrument, and a provocation. The response was not merely diplomatic but creative: *Kingdoms of Fire* was an argument made in the language of television, a counter-narrative produced precisely because narratives had come to matter.

As more states invest in prestige cultural production as an adjunct to foreign policy, the dynamics traced here are likely to multiply. The battles over who controls the past – whose imperial memory is legitimized, whose is contested – will continue to be fought not only in archives and academies, but also in streaming libraries and broadcast schedules.

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**Ceren Çetinkaya** is a Researcher at the oiip, where her work focuses on changing security perceptions and the future of EU-Turkey relations through strategic foresight methods. She completed her PhD in 2026 at Central European University with a thesis on Turkish foreign policy and cultural production.

# Going Solar in a Hurry: The Perks and Pains of Lebanon's Rushed Energy Transition

Tripoli, Lebanon.

by Camillo Stubenberg



# “Solar power, previously a niche interest of the environmentally minded, suddenly became the most sought-after commodity in the country.”

**N**our (name changed) is a sociology professor at Beirut Arab University. I met her in her office in Tariq el-Jdideh in the fall of 2022, while conducting interviews for my dissertation on solar energy in Lebanon. I had come not for advice on academic life, though I probably needed it. Instead, I came to ask about the solar system she had recently installed at her home in Antelias, a suburb north of Beirut.

Like hundreds of thousands of Lebanese, Nour had recently turned to the sun for electricity. I wanted to understand not only why, but how this shift was reshaping her everyday life.

Electricity has been a contentious topic in Lebanon for decades. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, the state utility, Electricité du Liban (EDL), has failed to provide continuous power. Electricity was rationed through rolling blackouts, load shedding that structured daily life across the country.

The gaps in state power were filled by private backup generators. Since the 1980s, neighborhood diesel generators, known as *ishtirak* [إشتراك] (meaning subscription in Arabic), provided backup electricity for a monthly fee to those who could afford them. Lucrative and

often politically connected, these operators ran local monopolies, sometimes referred to as a “generator mafia.” For decades, this uneasy coexistence proved remarkably stable. This combination of a weak and loss-making state utility and a lucrative private backup system were so emblematic of Lebanon’s political arrangement as a whole, that people often simply refer to EDL’s electricity as “dawle” [دولة] (meaning state). The all too familiar moment when the lights go out is thus often followed by a laconic “the state has left...” [الدولة ترحل].

This dual energy system was disrupted in the summer of 2021. A financial crisis led to severe fuel shortages that affected both EDL’s power plants as well as the private backup generators. The result was a near-total blackout. What followed was not just an energy transition. It was a relocation of infrastructure, from the state into the household.

## Turning to the Sun

As electricity supply gradually reduced to a trickle – first to a few hours a day, then eventually not coming for days on end – people became desperate. Food spoiled in warm fridges, and hot nights without air conditioning and fans felt like a continuous fever dream. Nour explained that she first tried to cope by stockpiling power banks, hoping to bridge the gaps between the few remaining hours of electricity. But as the outages became longer and longer, this strategy became untenable.

“I was constantly carrying power banks from the living room to the kitchen and back to my bedroom, it was chaotic.” Electricity, she explained, was like water or food: “I cannot live without it, not even for an hour.” She did what many others did: she bought a solar home system.

Solar power, previously a niche interest of the environmentally minded, suddenly became the most sought-after commodity in the country. Installation

companies were overwhelmed. George, an entrepreneur, explained that he was swamped with requests: “We started working day and night shifts and I arranged for my engineers to sleep in the office so they would not have to commute back home,” he explained to me in his office in Antelias close to Nour’s apartment. Nour was one of his many new customers – a relative of hers had recommended George’s company. For \$8,000 USD – Nour explained that she got a 10% friend-discount – the company installed an 8-kilowatt-peak system. The sixteen panels were installed on her apartment building’s roof while the batteries and inverter sit in the laundry room, next to the washing machine.

Solar did not just restore electricity. It reorganized how electricity was lived with, managed, and valued.

## Rewiring Everyday Life

Solar electricity is abundant when the sun shines. It is scarce the moment it sets. This basic fact reorganizes daily life for those who depend on it.

“Now we only wash on sunny days,” Nour explained when I asked her how her daily life had changed since. Energy-intensive activities are timed after the sun. On evenings and cloudy days restraint is required in order to preserve the weakest and often most expensive part of the system: the batteries. Electricity was also scarce in Lebanon’s old energy system, however, the erratic coming and going of state and generator electricity encouraged people to maximize their electricity consumption: EDL’s electricity was incredibly subsidized and generator operators largely sold electricity by flat-rate subscription rather than by kilowatt-hour (analogous to most internet subscriptions billed by bandwidth rather than by actual use). Decentralized solar reversed this logic of maximization. Instead solarized households turn into managers of scarcity and knowledge about the energy efficiency >

ratings of fridges and air conditioners has moved from niche to mainstream.

Electricity had become something to monitor, anticipate, and control, even from afar. This new visibility also reshaped social relations in the household. Laughing, Nour explained that her two sons moving out had an unexpected silver lining: “Now I don’t have to worry about them draining the battery at night.” The larger one’s system is and the fewer members living in a household, the fewer such in-house energy crises. In other cases it is often chores that are in a traditionally female-dominated sphere – washing and ironing are energy intensive activities – that have to be conducted when the sun is out.

Some 100 kilometers to the north-east of Beirut, in Baalbek, Ali and his household of six live at the other end of this spectrum. Their small two-panel system often runs out of power long before the night ends. With six people and different schedules it is also much harder to discipline the household’s energy consumption. As a result of constant over-use, the home system’s inverter frequently announces a drained battery with a long intermittent beeping. Most often this happens in the small hours between two and four in the morning, when Ali or his wife get up to make their way through the dark apartment to turn the system off.

In-house energy shortages are particularly frequent during the winter months when days are shorter and cloudier. This is not only annoying in the short run, but such deep discharges also shorten the battery’s lifespan. Careless electricity use thus not only leads to moments of darkness; it accelerates the slow breakdown of the infrastructure itself. To deal with the limitations of solar power in winter, those who can afford it, remain tied to either EDL’s grid, or a private backup generator for the rainy days. The domestication of energy infrastructure also brings into the home

what had previously been a collective energy crisis. In the past, a power outage during an important football game would likely lead to everyone cursing politicians and the government for mismanaging the country. When electricity is made on the roof and stored in one’s own battery, the culprit for the outage might well be sitting on the sofa right next to you.

## Exacerbating Inequality

The smaller a household’s solar system, the more frequent such in-house energy crises become. Ali’s nightly alarm is one such example: a small system stretched too far. For poorer households, this is not the exception but the rule.

By contrast, households like Nour’s operate under different conditions. With financial support from relatives abroad, she was able to install a larger system and replace inefficient appliances. These investments reduce strain on the system and extend its lifespan. For less affluent households, the opposite is the case. Small systems with overused batteries are more prone to failure. Most importantly, a large segment of poor households cannot afford any system – the smallest setup costing around \$1,000 USD.

This contrast becomes particularly stark at the margins. Mohammad, a Syrian refugee who in 2023 was working as a farm hand near the town of Deir El Ahmar in the northern Bekaa, relies on a notebook sized solar panel to light a single LED in his makeshift shelter. The little solar lamp – donated by the UN’s refugee agency – is barely enough to enable his two daughters to do their homework before its battery dies.

Since 2021 a quick look from above is surprisingly revealing of people’s socioeconomic status. Where you might have asked for the make of a car in the past, you can now also ask: how many panels do you have on your roof?

Photo: © shutterstock



Beirut, Lebanon, August 12, 2021: Protest against power shortages.

## New Connections: Diaspora, Local Patronage, and East Asian Supply Chains

Off-grid solar power reduces dependency on the power of state and private backup generators. For people like Nour, this emancipation from a dysfunctional state and a “corrupt” backup has come as a relief. However, Lebanon’s rush towards decentralized solar energy is not just a story of energy independence of the affluent and isolation of the poor. It also comes with new connections.

The first of these was economic. Since a financial crisis had not only wiped out people’s purchasing power (the Lebanese Lira lost over 98% of its value vis-à-vis the dollar) but also their savings (the banks quite literally welded their doors shut to fend off furious customers demanding access to their savings) most could not afford a solar power system out of pocket.

As a result, people turned to two familiar sources of financial support: family abroad or local networks of patronage.

Nour’s solar system was paid for by her family. Her brother, a doctor in the United Arab Emirates, worries constantly about his sister who is determined to stay in Lebanon. For him, the solar power system became a compromise of sorts: a way for him to make sure that his sister had at least secure access to electricity as the country was falling apart.

For those without such connections, other channels come into play. In the absence of a functioning banking sector,



“Solar power, previously a niche interest of the environmentally minded, suddenly became the most sought-after commodity in the country.”

the more intimate and predictable alternative. It is made on one's roof, stored in batteries next to the washing machine, and used more carefully.

This is both empowering and deeply unfair. Lebanon's solar transition has created new forms of competence, autonomy, and pride. It has also turned households into miniature utilities and made inequality visible from the sky. The question Lebanon leaves us with is not whether solar power works. It does. The harder question is what kind of society emerges when the work of keeping the lights on is handed back to people themselves.

The current war has added another layer to this question. Lebanon's solar transition has made electricity more dispersed, more visible, and, for some, more controllable. But dispersion is not the same as protection. A panel on a roof may be harder to switch off from a ministry, a power plant, or a fuel terminal, but it remains embedded in fragile homes, villages, farms, supply chains, and conflicts.

For the rest of the world, Lebanon is not a model to copy. It is a reflection of what energy transitions can become when they happen under pressure: fast, inventive, unequal, and full of unintended consequences. The sun may be abundant, but living by it is not all sunshine.

**Camillo Stubenberg** is a Social Scientist and Development Practitioner whose work focuses on the intersections of technological, environmental, and societal change. His current projects include a comparative study of crisis-driven energy transitions and an applied research initiative on the role of Syrian diaspora entrepreneurs in post-conflict reconstruction. He holds a PhD from Cornell University, a Magister from the University of Vienna, and a BSc from BOKU Vienna.

religio-political organizations stepped in to fill the gap. The most important such institution was Hezbollah's microfinance organization and de facto bank, Al Qard al Hassan (AQAH). Recognizing the sudden rise in demand for solar power, the organization offered a special solar loan where monthly payments were set to reflect the previous cost of a generator subscription.

Firaz, a farmer I met near Ain, another village in the Bekaa Valley, was one of their new clients. He did not consider himself a big fan of Hezbollah. But since he did not have relatives abroad who could help him out, he put his political concerns aside. The loan program, he told me, was simply a good solution. Using his wife's gold jewelry as collateral, it allowed him to install solar panels when no other option was available.

The second major component of Lebanon's rushed transition was the availability of cheap but good solar kit from China (a 550 Watt PV panel costs only about 85 Euros on the Lebanese retail market). The massive price drops (90 percent in the last decade) make solar the most economically feasible avenue to energy security. This availability of affordable technology on the world market was complemented by the rapid development of a fiercely competitive local market. As one manager of an established solar energy company put it to me in

2023: "Now anybody who knows how to climb a roof is a solar technician."

The war between Israel and Hezbollah has revealed another, more brutal dimension of this new energy landscape. Decentralized solar systems are harder to shut down through a single power plant, substation, or fuel depot. But they are neither invisible, nor invulnerable. In southern Lebanon, solar panels both on private houses, as well as the larger systems often used to power municipal water pumps and irrigation systems have been damaged or destroyed in Israeli attacks.

### Lessons from a Rushed Transition

When I last spoke to Nour, she no longer described her solar system as a temporary fix. She talked about it with the confidence of someone who had learned a new way of living with electricity. She knew when to run the washing machine, when to save the battery, when to trust the weather, and when not to. Her roof, laundry room, and phone screen had become part of an energy system she could finally control.

That predictability is one of the unexpected consequences of Lebanon's crisis. For decades, electricity arrived, disappeared, and returned as a sign of a state that was both present and absent. Today, for those who can afford solar, power has become

“It Is What It Is”

# “It Is What It Is”

## Hoping for Justice

by Christina Hainzl

Ali Cheri's destroyed apartment in Beirut.

# “When can an individual bring a case before a national or international court for a violation of international humanitarian law?”

## Paris/Vienna, November 26, 2024:

The French-Lebanese artist and filmmaker Ali Cherri is en route to Vienna in order to prepare his first solo exhibition in Austria, *How I Am Monument*, which is due to open in a week at the Secession Building.

## Beirut, November 26, 2024:

Shortly before the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, which has been brokered by the USA and France, the Israeli attacks intensify again. Ali Cherri's parents, Mahmoud Naim Cherri and Nadira Hayek, live in a district that is considered safe. As evening falls, a bomb destroys Ali Cherri's apartment without warning, killing his parents, who live there, and five more people. Months later, he recounts that he had spoken that day on the telephone with his mother, who was waiting, full of hope, for the ceasefire that was due to come into effect early on November 27, 2024.

## Paris, April 2, 2026:

Ali Cherri files a suit in France in cooperation with the International Federation of Human Rights and Amnesty International. The objective of the legal action is to investigate the attack and to recognize it as a war crime: “As a son, a citizen, and a victim, it is my duty to ensure that this war crime committed by the Israeli army is recognized for what it is, so that it may be brought to justice – for my parents and for all the civilians killed that day. Justice cannot undo death, but seeking justice means refusing

to let impunity lead to the destruction of other lives,” says Ali Cherri.

The legal action brought by Cherri around sixteen months later overlays his personal anguish with a broader question: how do we deal with the deaths of civilians, whether these occur in – to mention just a few – highly visible conflicts that are widely discussed in the media, such as the wars in Lebanon, Ukraine, Gaza, and Iran; or in less visible conflicts like that in Sudan; or in a conflict that is as good as invisible, such as the one in Libya.

When, in fact, can an individual file suit with a national or international court regarding the violation of humanitarian law? Gabriel Lentner, associate professor of international law and fellow at Stanford Law School, summarizes:

“In principle, States have the duty to investigate and eventually prosecute war crimes committed by their nationals or armed forces and, also, all crimes committed on their territory.

Where countries have neither the will nor the ability to do this, the ICC can undertake the task. This is the so-called Principle of Complementarity. But in many situations in which the ICC would be engaged, it lacks jurisdiction. The ICC can only investigate if the alleged crimes were committed by nationals or armed forces of a State party to the ICC or on its territory. In the States mentioned, neither the USA, China, Russia, nor Israel, Lebanon, or Syria are members. That means because Palestine is a party to the ICC, the



One of the few objects that were recovered after the bombing.

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"The war is the war for human imagination, and no one can fight it but you,"  
Diane di Prima, Rant, Revolutionary Letter #75

court can prosecute crimes committed by Israeli and Palestinian nationals, but cannot do so in relation to Lebanon.

However, national courts, such as those in France or in Germany, can close this legal protection loophole by citing the principle of "universal jurisdiction." On this basis, States have the right to prosecute war crimes, regardless of where and by whom they are committed."

In practice, this principle often runs up against practical difficulties, such as a lack of the necessary resources and the requirement to prove that a country's national interests are affected. This also explains why so few cases have been brought in Europe to date, adds Lentner. "In Germany, a historic judgment was

made on this basis in 2022 when the Syrian Anwar R. was convicted of committing crimes against humanity by the Higher Regional Court of Koblenz, and verdicts have also been reached in France on the same principle. But the focus is always on the specific criminal responsibility of an individual for these crimes. Countries themselves are generally protected by immunity from cases brought before national courts."

The lawyer identifies the enforcement of the law as the decisive weak point. Because there is no centralized enforcement mechanism in place, it is countries themselves, in principle, that are responsible for policing international obligations.

### Symbolic Power and Participation

Regardless of the outcome, Cherri's legal action challenges us to ask whether the principles enshrined in a democracy are always upheld and applied. However, the way in which we deal with this concern is also a cultural and social question: how do we respond to those who disregard and ride roughshod over human rights?

The war researcher Daniela Ingruber also recognizes the symbolic importance of this legal action: "The thing that fascinates me about this action is the fact that Cherri is also framing it as a public project, in which he is employing the law as his medium without sowing hatred. While many people

Only a few childhood photographs have survived: Ali Cherri with his father, Mahmoud Naim Cherri, and his siblings.



would not be in a position to do this, he is, thanks to his prominence and the support that he attracts. To this extent, I believe that this action is very important from a symbolic perspective, because it challenges traditional roles and people want to get involved. And when someone makes a stand and attempts to do this in such a peaceful way, it is fantastic. It is now up to the media to provide more regular – and more vigorous – coverage of Cherri's legal action."

## Against Indifference

In 2006, Paolo Pellegrin and Scott Anderson documented the thirty-three-day war in Lebanon, also known as the July War. The title of their documentary *Double Blind*, borrowed from the scientific world, describes a method of study in which neither the tester nor the tested are aware of the

true nature of the object of the test. "Double Blind was an apt metaphor and also encapsulates what it was like to experience the war first hand, a war unlike any we have ever experienced before, and perhaps a harbinger for the modern wars to come. As journalists, we were traveling through a battlescape, where all the traditional features of the frontline had disappeared." Pellegrin's critical reflection upon "what sparked it and what was achieved in this war" not only strikingly resembles the current situation in Lebanon, but also paints a picture of the circumstances in which many people find themselves today.

We cannot be compensated for the loss of a human being. This is precisely why a decision by the French authorities to address Cherri's case would mark a democratic "awakening" and provide a signal for the innumerable individuals affected across all conflict regions.

Perhaps it would even encourage us to believe in design. And it could also be a sign of hope – which does not atone for what has happened, but makes it seem more manageable.

## Paris, March 2026:

Charbel, a musician and writer, came to Paris from Beirut a year ago. As we sit outside the café on the edge of the Jardin du Luxembourg, soaking up the first warm rays of the sun, he tells me that he can hardly sleep. The war has intensified again, bringing up feelings of fear that tether him permanently to his mobile phone. "The only thing that we all want is a little peace." Around this time, the photographer Mohamad Shehab, who helped Ali Cherri reconstruct and document the attack that killed his parents, is also killed, together with his young daughter, when his own home is bombed.

## "The fire is central"

Diane di Prima, Rant, Revolutionary Letter #75



Ali Cherri with his mother, Nadira Hayek.

Christina Hainz is the Director of the Transdisciplinary Lab 'Democracy and Society in Transition' at the University of Krems, and an Affiliated Researcher at NICHE, Venice. Her work focuses on art and the visualization of conflicts in the Mediterranean region.

# “Flourishing in the Abyss”

by Sophie Reichelt, Olena Butnyk & Emilia Webhofer

Once hailed as one of Latin America’s most prosperous and stable representative democracies, with its wealth built on vast oil reserves, Venezuela has descended into participatory competitive authoritarianism, economic collapse, and mass emigration over the past two decades under Hugo Chávez and, especially, Nicolás Maduro. The capture

of Nicolás Maduro by US forces on 3 January 2026 marked a profound rupture in this trajectory. However, the future remains highly uncertain.

In order to gain insights from within Venezuela at this critical moment, we spoke in April 2026 with the Venezuelan historian and political analyst Margarita López Maya, Anja Dargatz, head of

the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Caracas, and the Venezuelan journalist Florantonia Singer. Our conversations focused on everyday life under Maduro, the role civil society played in this abysmal context and may play in the future, and what Venezuela needs in order to stabilize. Does Maduro’s fall offer a glimmer of hope?



Nottinghamshire, UK, 4 January 2026: British Newspaper widely reported that Trump had captured Maduro and was temporarily controlling Venezuela.

“ It was terrible. The Maduro era is one of the worst eras that Venezuela has known. There was no future in Venezuela.”

Margarita López Maya

Maracaibo, Venezuela, 25 July 2024: President Nicolás Maduro is welcomed by a crowd of Venezuelans and militants of the ruling PSUV party, at the closing of the electoral campaign.

In 2016, the United Nations recognized that Venezuela was entering a multi-dimensional and multicausal crisis. By 2017, more than 90 percent of families were living in poverty (63.7% in extreme poverty). The once excellent public education system, funded by oil revenues, has collapsed. Hospitals suffer from severe shortages of electricity, water, and medicine, with many deaths going unrecorded during the pandemic due to manipulated statistics, as López Maya states. While the Venezuelan population was suffering from hunger and economic collapse, Singer and López Maya illustrate, the ruling elite enjoyed a prosperous life – channeling plundered resources and funds to autocratic allies such as Cuba, Russia, Iran or Hezbollah. Besides, Maduro’s “estado delincuente” (criminal state) became evident in the systematic violence exercised by state security forces against the Venezuelan population. These factors have led to a collective despair, as López Maya describes it. “Suicide rates, depression, and all mental illnesses have increased sharply. I know people who have committed suicide.”

The crisis has resulted in a huge exodus: since Maduro came to power in 2013, more than a quarter of the population has left. For Venezuelan society, this exodus has “destroyed the capacity to sustain itself economically,” López Maya states. At the same time, today, those who fled Venezuela are effectively “leading the country.” They provide care for older relatives, organize medical and nursing support “on the distance,” and channel remittances of around 4–5 billion dollars annually. Singer also highlights the diaspora’s role in professional development and knowledge transfer, pointing to migrant petroleum engineers funding training programs for Venezuelan students and clinics reconnecting with Venezuelan doctors abroad to train local staff. Both emphasize that the diaspora has also been crucial in drawing international

attention to Venezuela’s crisis that, as Singer claims, has been ignored by the international community for years.

### Social and Political Movements, Solidarity & Street Politics in Venezuela

Venezuela’s civil society has historically been relatively weak, largely due to the country’s oil-dependent political economy, which concentrated power within the state and reduced the need for autonomous civic organization. Under Chávez, attempts to institutionalize grassroots participation, most notably through so-called “community councils” and “communes”, initially aimed at fostering local autonomy, but gradually became instruments of state control.

At the same time, as Florantonia Singer highlights, the prolonged crisis has led to a notable strengthening and diversification of civil society actors. Particularly since the intensification of repression in 2017, new initiatives have



Photo: © shutterstock



Madrid, Spain, 9 January 2025: Protest against Maduro.

“ Out of this repression, a new level of organization has emerged—born from necessity and entirely self-financed.”

Anja Dargatz

emerged in fields such as human rights advocacy, collaborative journalism, and community-based service provision. These developments suggest that crises do not merely erode social structures but can also generate new forms of collective action and civic engagement.

Around the issue of arbitrary detentions, new grassroots organizations, often led by relatives of detainees, have formed and sustained protest activities even under harsh conditions. These groups, Dargatz notes, are particularly remarkable because they are not externally funded but have developed organically from within society. Their actions, ranging from vigils to protest camps outside prisons, represent a form of political mobilization that is directly rooted in lived experiences of injustice and state violence.

In practice, grassroots initiatives play a crucial role in compensating for the absence of state-provided services. Singer points to the proliferation of

community kitchens, informal education systems, and grassroots health financing mechanisms as key examples of self-managed responses to structural deficits. In a context where public healthcare is largely non-functional, crowdfunding initiatives and community-based support networks have effectively become substitutes for social security systems.

Similarly, informal educational arrangements, such as “tareas dirigidas,” where teachers provide low-cost instruction in their homes, have emerged to address the collapse of the public education system. These practices illustrate how social organization extends far beyond political mobilization, encompassing essential functions of daily life and survival.

Dargatz points to the example of delivery drivers, who have developed strong informal networks of mutual support. These networks function both as mechanisms of everyday solidarity,

# “When the economy tightens, solidarity becomes more difficult.”

Florantonia Singer

providing immediate assistance in case of accidents or conflicts, and as platforms for collective action. In one instance, workers successfully organized protests against a new tax, leading to its withdrawal. Such cases illustrate how informal labour structures can evolve into spaces of political agency, even in highly precarious conditions.

Singer cautions that while these forms of organization reflect remarkable levels of community resilience, they cannot substitute for functioning state institutions in the long term. Their sustainability is constrained by economic conditions, and their reach is often uneven.

At the same time, as Dargatz argues, the current context has strengthened certain aspects of civil society, generating new forms of resistance, rights-claiming, and collective organization that did not exist in the same way before. This creates a central tension: while grassroots initiatives enable survival and, in some cases, political agency, they also risk normalizing the absence of the state.

Anja Dargatz describes Venezuela’s civil society as “very professional” and resilient, having evolved into an “extremely valuable” political actor through the mobilization of previously apolitical citizens. However, she argues that this “newly grown” civil society remains disconnected from political parties and trade unions, preventing a “common reform agenda.” Florantonia Singer similarly praises its “organizational muscle” and ability to “flourish in the abyss,” yet warns that civil society has been

“diminished and decimated” by state repression, restrictive laws, and shrinking international funding. Venezuela therefore possesses a highly competent civil society, but one that must still unite while navigating the “minefield” of repression and resource scarcity.

While many initiatives are rooted in everyday survival, they often evolve into forms of political expression. Dargatz highlights how organizations of relatives of arbitrarily detained individuals have emerged as a particularly significant form of grassroots mobilization, maintaining protests even under conditions of repression. These groups represent a new, self-organized form of political engagement, grounded in direct experiences of injustice.

At a broader level, López Maya situates these developments within a longer tradition of “street politics” in Latin America, which becomes especially prominent in contexts where formal institutions fail to channel social demands. In Venezuela, cycles of protest, often driven by both political and socio-economic grievances, remain a central mode of collective action, even as NGOs and activists face increasing criminalization and repression.

## A (positive) Glimpse into the Future

Anja Dargatz observes that many Venezuelans abroad still feel a strong sense of belonging to their home country, resulting in an “overwhelming sense of hope” to return. Yet return plans are shaped not only by ties to home, but also by difficult experiences abroad. López Maya points to the “criminalization, stigma, and the rise of racism in host societies” faced by many migrants, while stricter migration policies under politicians such as Chilean President José Antonio Kast, who pursues a hardline agenda of deportations and border controls, further influence these return aspirations. Still, any large-scale return will

ultimately depend on whether conditions in Venezuela genuinely stabilize.

According to Florantonia Singer such a stabilization requires a concrete “roadmap with timelines and commitments” agreed upon by all political actors, including the opposition. Transition must go beyond mere power management or elite negotiation, urging a fundamental re-institutionalization, ranging from constitutional reform to a complete overhaul of the judicial and party systems and, in particular, the abolition of indefinite reelection.

For Margarita López Maya, Venezuela’s future hinges on the premise that the interim government under Delcy Rodríguez (PSUV) bears the primary responsibility for dismantling the authoritarian system it constructed before elections take place. Opposition forces and civil society should pressure the interim government and the United States to anchor the country’s path toward credible, sustainable democratic elections. However, both López Maya and Singer share their scepticism on Washington’s support: “I don’t see the U.S. as being very interested in democracy per se, unless investors demand it.” (Florantonia Singer)

All three interviewees regard the opposition politician María Corina Machado, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025, as a powerful figure, though locating her power differently. López Maya sees Machado as the clear opposition leader and the best available option >

# “The same actors who put this dictatorship in place must dismantle it.”

Margarita López Maya



Photo: © shutterstock

Oil field in Venezuela.

“ We are a country in which the meaning of work, and its ability to drive society and the economy, has been destroyed.”

Florantonia Singer

“ Street politics in Venezuela is very strong [...] because there are no institutions to channel demands.”

Margarita López Maya

once the authoritarian system has been dismantled. Dargatz is more sceptical about Machado's standing inside Venezuela. She describes a split between the diaspora opposition that is “more uncompromising, more radical” and the domestic opposition, who have had to adapt to political realities and negotiate with Maduro. Instead, Delcy Rodríguez would have a real chance of consolidating power because many Venezuelans are currently more concerned with “human rights and inflation” than with maximalist democratic demands, concerns Rodríguez appears to address. Singer

agrees but raises scepticism as to whether her current reforms are merely a way of “letting off steam” to ease the pressure and consolidate power.

In any case, for Anja Dargatz, stabilization in Venezuela depends less on concrete, everyday reforms tackling inflation, which ended 2025 at nearly 500%. She argues that external financial injections, such as potential support from the United States, could help stabilize the situation. The US decision in April 2026 to lift sanctions on Venezuela's Central Bank (BCV) was crucial for the provision of such recovery loans.

To stabilize the economy, however, “corruption on a large scale needs to be tackled,” Dargatz states. In this vein, Singer explains that international sanctions led to a “Wild West capitalism”, characterized by ghost ships, cryptocurrencies, and barter deals. This is fueling public distrust that oil revenues will actually reach the social and infrastructure funds announced by the interim president. While corruption permeates many levels of the state, Dargatz argues that transparently managing oil revenues would mark a significant

progress. However, given that we are in the “final stretch of the fossil fuel era”, as Singer calls it, she warns against relying again and solely on oil as a “lifeline”. As formal employment lost its ability to secure a dignified livelihood, many Venezuelans were forced into precarious, high-risk survival economies. On top of that, the government has been permissive toward criminal organizations such as the transnational gang Tren de Aragua and the ELN, both of which are deeply entrenched in gold and illegal mining activities. Given this complex entanglement, Dargatz argues that the “mine mafia” cannot be dismantled by force alone. Instead, the state should incentivize formal employment and rebuild the social value of labor. This would offer a viable alternative to exploitative structures, effectively reclaiming the economy from criminal control.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026 marked a historic rupture in Venezuela's prolonged crisis. The event generated shock, cautious hope, and uncertainty at the same time. While many Venezuelans perceived the intervention as a long-overdue disruption that opened political space, fear and coercive structures continue

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to shape reactions within the country. Rather than resolving the crisis, the removal of Maduro appears to have reconfigured it, leaving fundamental questions of governance, legitimacy, and stability unresolved.

But it has also opened new possibilities. A momentum that should be harnessed by Venezuelan civil society, which has “flourished in the abyss.” Beyond ensuring everyday survival, it is “actively engaged in documenting, speaking out, supporting victims, preserving the memory of past events, seeking justice on the international stage, advocating for reparations and guarantees of non-repetition regarding all human rights violations committed in recent years, and fostering hope.” (Florantonia Singer) This creates a central tension: while grassroots initiatives enable survival and, in some cases, political agency, they also risk normalizing the absence of the state. The challenge for Venezuela’s future therefore lies not in replacing the state with informal solidarity networks, but in transforming the resilience and organizational capacity of civil society into the foundation of a more democratic and accountable state.

**Margarita López Maya** is a Venezuelan Historian and Political Analyst. She has worked at the Central University of Venezuela and several institutions in the United States. She has also served as president of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

**Anja Dargatz** is the Head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) office in Caracas, Venezuela.

**Florantonia Singer** is a Venezuelan Journalist who contributes to the Spanish newspaper El País, as well as being part of the management team at the independent media outlet El Bus TV.

## Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century – 1990s

- **Oil Wealth & Political Stability:** Fueled by the world’s largest oil reserves, Venezuela became a prosperous state under the 1961 Constitution, marked by growth, democratic stability and social development
- **Resource Curse:**
  - The rich oil-state preemptively satisfied social demands, effectively stifling the development of a vibrant, independent civil society
  - Over-reliance on oil exports left the national economy structurally fragile to global price shocks
- **The Oil Crisis:** The 1980s revenue collapse exposed this structural fragility; political elites proved unable to address the resulting long-term economic decline.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Public disillusionment with the democratic system increased

## Chávez’s “Revolución Bolivariana” (1998–2013)

- **Leveraging Discontent:** Hugo Chávez harnessed public disillusionment with the democratic status quo, winning power in 1998.
- **Constitutional & Structural Shift:** The 1999 Constitution established participatory democracy elements (e.g., recall referendums), while the state expanded through communal councils, the nationalization of strategic industries (especially oil), and large-scale social programs (“misiones”).
- **Hybrid Regime & Institutional Erosion:** While formal democratic frameworks persisted, Chávez systematically hollowed them out by politicizing the judiciary and dismantling media pluralism, thereby consolidating executive power and neutralizing traditional checks and balances.
- **Radicalization:** The 2002 coup attempt was a transformative rupture, allowing Chávez to militarize his political agenda and adopt a more confrontational, polarization-based style of governance.
- **Chávez’s Lasting Popular Appeal:** Nevertheless, Chávez maintained a vast, deeply loyal base until his death.

## Manifesting a participatory competitive authoritarianism (2013–2026):

- **Shift in Power:** In 2013, after Chávez’s death, Nicolás Maduro succeeded him as president.
- **Transition to Coercion:** In contrast to Chávez, Maduro lacked broad public support. The regime shifted from a hybrid model to rule via raw state repression, institutionalized clientelism, and militarized policing.
- **Abduction:** On January 3, 2026, Nicolás Maduro was removed from power by an US-led military intervention.

# The Fall of an “Illiberal Democracy”

Lessons to be Learned for Europe  
from Orbán's Electoral Defeat

by Ivan Vejvoda

Budapest, Hungary,  
15 March 2026.

**A** historic moment occurred in Europe on April 12, 2026, with the fall from power of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz political party after 16 long years of seeming invincibility.

A beacon of populist, illiberal politics in Europe, Orbán had woven a tight net of relationships with similar political actors in Europe and the Americas. He had made Hungary a political and financial hub for these politicians, their parties and movements. He wanted to change the EU, but only succeeded in blocking a number of its decisions. The values of democracy and the rule of law prevailed among Hungarian voters, bringing the country back into the EU mainstream alongside those pursuing the project of a democratic Europe united in diversity.

In 2013 at a Washington, D.C., think tank, a full-day closed-door discussion took place on the situation in Hungary. High level Hungarian representatives were present along with former governmental officials and members of the Washington expert community.

The Government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had been in office since April 2010 and the overwhelming victory of his Fidesz-KDNP coalition at that election secured a two-thirds “super-majority,” 68% of the seats. Hungary and Poland were the poster-child countries of post-communist transition to democracy in the 1990s. Both joined NATO (in 1999) and the European Union (in 2004).

The model student Hungary and its 2010 elected government then abruptly began to regress on democratic practices and values. Using the two-thirds parliamentary majority the constitution and laws were changed. The separation of powers and checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government were being dismantled.

“Orbán’s ambitions went far beyond Hungary. They were Europe-wide and global. Under Orbán Hungary became a hub and support base for right-wing groups, movements and parties.”

At the 2013 Washington, D.C., discussion the Hungarian representatives were staunchly defending their policies arguing the sovereign right of democratically elected governments to do as they saw best in the interest of their nation. The debate was heated and at one moment mid-way through the day, a US senior official who knew Hungary well, had served there and knew the language said: “If most of us [non-Hungarians and former Hungarian officials] are saying to you that your policies are not going in the right direction then something must be wrong.” And political and societal processes did continue to regress. Abuse of power and of public funds went clearly against the public good.

During 16 years since taking office, power has been fully concentrated in the hands of the circle around the Prime Minister. Hungary had become an electoral autocracy, with Orbán’s close acolytes amassing huge amounts of wealth, expanding control and oversight over the country’s economy. Abuse of EU-funded contracts has led to a suspension of delivery of part of those funds from the EU.

Brussels, Belgium, 19 December 2024:  
Viktor Orbán at a Press Conference.



Photo: © shutterstock

Control over the media, shutting down or buying out many independent media outlets made the public sphere restrained for open and fully transparent debate. Academic freedom was being assailed so much so that the Central European University had to move, go into exile from Budapest to Vienna. Electoral processes were thus clearly unfair although free. Orbán was determined to showcase his country as a model of sovereigntist illiberalism.

There was resistance to the direction the country was taking. Massive protests occurred against many of these anti-democratic policies over the past 16 years although Prime Minister Orbán kept winning elections in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The opposition did manage to win a significant election victory for the capital city Budapest in 2019 and 2024 by narrow margins and Gergely Karácsony became mayor.

Orbán ruled by constantly inventing enemies, searching for scapegoats to keep his voters in fear of change and desiring continuity. The failures of preceding governments to deliver >

## “ EU democracy was at stake as Viktor Orbán's Hungary had aspirations to influence and transform the EU.”

greater prosperity and stability, led voters in 2010 to seek more certainty. Orbán's conservative pro-family, anti-LGBT, anti-woke policies and regular generous handouts appealed to a great many voters.

Orbán's ambitions, though, went far beyond Hungary. His ambitions were Europe-wide and even global. Hungary became a hub and support base for right-wing and far-right wing groups, movements and parties. Orbán, his party and his supporters were wary of what they deemed was a loss of sovereignty. Sovereignism led to a desire maybe to leave the EU or change it.

Given that support in Hungary for the EU's remaining within the EU was – and still is – high, as is the case in all other EU member states too, Orbán started changing his policy into reshaping the EU from the inside. This was in synchronicity with similar demands of far-right parties in France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic to name just a few.

In June 2024, in Vienna, Orbán, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the head of the Austrian far-right Freedom Party announced the founding of the Euroskeptic group Patriots for Europe (PfE). Along with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) they hold over 20% of seats in the EU Parliament.

Their intent was changing the EU into a conservative, Euroskeptic, right-wing outlet, notably using Hungarian state funds, to create a network of

domestic and international institutions thanks to Orbán's leverage. They thereby pursued the goal to support all those in Hungary, Europe and the US who shared this worldview of the preponderance of national sovereignty, anti-globalism and conservative unity.

The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a Budapest-based think tank, and its Brussels antenna were at the core of this effort. The holding of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest on 5 occasions, bringing together 3,000 attendees from all over the world, gave it global heft.

The backsliding of democracy in the EU shook the institution given the unexpected turn that a former communist country would reverse course after a successful transformational path to liberal democracy, constitutionalism and rule of law.

In July 2014, Victor Orbán declared that he was aspiring for Hungary to be an “illiberal democracy,” explaining that “societies do not have to be liberal to be democratic.” For him, elections are a source of legitimacy and not a manifestation of the rule of law.

The EU was complacent at first and hoped that it would get rid of the problem through alternation, but Orbán kept winning. Meanwhile in Poland the Law and Justice Party (PiS) which had briefly ruled from 2005 to 2007 came back to power in full force from 2015–2023 on a nationalist, socially conservative ticket. The judiciary was brought to heel and the media were put under governmental control.

The problem of democracy made its way onto the EU's agenda. The question put before the EU Council and EU Commission was: How to cope with member states undermining the pillars of the EU, namely democracy, the fundamental democratic values and the rule of law?

Article 7 of the Treaty of EU stipulated that a member state's right could be suspended if they breached these fundamental rights. The Article was triggered for the first time ever by the Commission against Poland in December 2017 and later in September 2018 against Hungary by the European Parliament.

Still, there was an awkward sense that something was happening which undermined the very essence of the EU. Hungary, which was a member of the European People's Party, the biggest and most influential European political family, decided after being threatened to be expelled to leave on its own account.

Hungary had become a disruptor in Europe, in the EU, as well as a disruptor of democracy. Orbán became an inspiration to Donald Trump and right-wing personalities flocked to Budapest to hail Orbán's domestic success and his support to many of them.

Orbán could not be satisfied by merely leading a country of 9.5 million people. He sought satisfaction in promoting “illiberal democracy.” For that purpose, he travelled far and wide and spread his illiberal sermon. When Hungary assumed the rotating Presidency of the EU in July 2024, he probably was over-confident when travelling to Kyiv, Moscow, Beijing and Mar-a-Lago with the intent to mediate between Russia and Ukraine and bring peace. What is more, he thereby upset the other European states as these actions had taken place without consultation or agreement from the EU Council. As Ivan

## “ Europe celebrates with this Hungarian election the work of democracy and the defeat of an electoral autocracy.”



Photo: © shutterstock

Péter Magyar led a very impactful well thought out and prepared campaign. All his actions, statements and appointments after the victory indicate an in-depth approach to the huge challenges that lie ahead. The Polish example can be helpful, but having a two-thirds majority in Parliament can be of even more salience.

The ramifications of the Hungarian elections must not be underestimated in any way, nor should they be overstated. The Hungarians themselves are well aware of the blind alley into which Fidesz had led them as they are of the tough road ahead.

Europe celebrates with this Hungarian election the work of democracy and the defeat of an electoral autocracy. These types of regimes, in Europe at least, seem to have an expiry date. In Poland it was eight years, in Hungary twice as long. One can only take so much authoritarianism at a time. Many lessons are to be learned for the future of Europe.

**Ivan Vejvoda** is a Senior Researcher at the oiip. He was a Permanent Fellow and Interim Rector at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna (2017-2025), Senior Vice President at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington DC (2010-2016), and Senior Foreign Policy Adviser to the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić.

Krastev put it, ironically, he behaved in a globalist fashion which seems quite unusual for an anti-globalist.

Orbán blocked decisions of the EU to support Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression. He put brakes on many decisions related to EU sanctions packages aimed at Russia. With Orbán's election defeat, the €90 billion of aid to Ukraine was finally unlocked after having been stalled for so long.

A landslide victory of Prime Minister Elect Péter Magyar and his party Tisza on April 12 led to a two-thirds majority in Parliament opening the path for reversing many of the decisions of the 16 years of the Orbán government. In the end, alternation in power did come to Hungary, and with it, the restoration of the rule of law and the separation of powers will be foremost. The pursuit and scrutinizing of ill-gained wealth by an independent judiciary will be key. There is already news about the flight of capital and people close to Orbán.

The ups and downs of political dynamics have been both hopeful and unsettling if one just takes the example of the Visegrád four countries. In

Poland the populist PiS government was defeated by Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition in 2023, but the populist Karol Nawrocki won the Presidential elections in 2025. In Slovakia, the populist Robert Fico returned to power after he had been ousted after mass protests sparked by the killing of journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Maria Kušnírová who had uncovered high-level corruption of Slovak officials linked to the Italian Mafia. In the Czech Republic, the populist billionaire businessman Andrej Babiš and his party ANO won the elections in October 2025.

The elections in Hungary carry decidedly more weight than those in smaller Member States. EU democracy was at stake too as Viktor Orbán's Hungary had aspirations to influence and transform the EU and go even beyond.

Orbán's methods had domestically reached the end of the tether. Declaring that Ukraine was the greatest threat to Hungary simply did not pass muster. Voters saw through the propaganda. More importantly, the economy had not been performing for several years and after 16 years voters decided it was time to change.

# More Than Trade:

## AfCFTA and Africa's Development Agenda in a Fragmenting Global System

by Tsion Bergano

Nairobi Park in Kenya.

Photo: © shutterstock



“ Rather than restoring a system that has long excluded it, Africa is institutionalizing its own terms of engagement.”

I was in the room in 2018, when the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) was signed in Kigali, Rwanda, on 21 March 2018. I vividly remember the mood among staff of the African Union Commission and African diplomats – there was a sense of optimism, even celebration. It was palpable. There was also a quiet recognition of the long-standing frustration with our own limitations in advancing our collective self-interest, and with the structural marginalization that has kept Africa in a repetitive cycle.

That early confidence has gained renewed meaning in a global context defined by fractured supply chains, protectionism, and the weakening of multilateral norms. From the vantage point of the Global North, these trends appear as unprecedented disruptions. From an African perspective, however, this moment is less a rupture than a continuation of an older pattern. The continent’s position in the global economy has long been characterized by structural asymmetries, limited representation, and the persistent sidelining of its interests.

The AfCFTA’s adoption can thus be read as a conscious response to these historical conditions to build an alternative framework of cooperation. The agreement represents an evolving development agenda aimed at restructuring intra-African economic relations, strengthening collective capacity, and reducing external dependency.

### Historical Context: Africa’s Structural Marginalization

Africa’s entry into the global economy has always been lopsided. During colonial times, the continent was molded to supply raw materials, while any effort at manufacturing or value addition was suppressed or outright blocked. After decolonization, development strategies, frequently influenced by external actors, kept these old patterns alive. Structural adjustment programs from the 1980s onward doubled down on primary exports at the expense of industrial growth.

The post-1945 trading system, despite all its talk of global inclusion, mirrored the power imbalances of those early years. In practice, decision-making in institutions like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and, later, the World Trade Organization (WTO) rested with rich, industrialized countries. African states were rarely at the table when rules were written. Instead, they became rule-takers, not rule-makers, and their options for shaping their own futures were sharply limited.

This history casts current disruptions in a different light. For Africa, the cracks in multilateralism do not

signal catastrophe; they simply lay bare a truth long understood on the continent: these global rules were never built for Africa’s development.

### AfCFTA’s Design and Development Logic

The AfCFTA, which entered into force in 2021, brings together 54 signatory states, with 49 having ratified the agreement. It creates the world’s largest free trade area by membership, linking 1.4 billion people and an economy valued at over 3 trillion dollars. Its scope extends well beyond tariffs, covering services, investment, intellectual property, competition policy, and digital trade.

What distinguishes the AfCFTA is how explicitly it connects trade to development. The agreement allows for gradual liberalization, safeguards for sensitive sectors, and policy space for countries to align trade commitments with broader economic strategies. This flexibility recognizes that diversity across the continent can be managed.

Trading under the AfCFTA officially commenced in January 2021. That said, this is not to suggest that Africa has fully realized its economic >



Photo: © shutterstock



“The AfCFTA shows that integration can proceed without uniformity, and that cooperation can be sustained even in conditions of inequality.”

integration ambitions. Implementation on the ground remains complex and, at times, uneven. A range of factors continue to pose challenges, including infrastructure gaps and the limited readiness of existing systems to adapt to the new trade regime. Nevertheless, the political will remains strong, and the commitment to making the AfCFTA work is clearly there.

AfCFTA was never meant to be just a tariff-cutting exercise. Its objectives go well beyond trade liberalization. They include industrial development, diversification, and the promotion of regional value chains. What that means in practice is a shift in how Africa positions itself economically. Instead of exporting raw materials in isolation, the idea is to build production systems that operate across borders. Processing, manufacturing, logistics, financing, and distribution can all happen within the continent.

Take coffee as a simple example. A country like Ethiopia should not be limited to exporting raw beans. Under an AfCFTA logic, inputs could come from one country, processing could happen in another, packaging elsewhere,

and the final product distributed across the continent. That is the kind of integration being envisioned.

### Implementation in Motion

At an AfCFTA training for Ethiopian businesses, one exporter described how the framework had shifted his outlook. His company, which produces strawberries, had traditionally exported to the UAE and Europe. When flights were disrupted because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, he faced significant losses and began looking closer to home. Within weeks, he identified buyers in Nigeria and completed his first shipment under AfCFTA procedures. “I had never thought of trading within Africa before,” he said, “but now I need to understand how it works.” His experience reflects a broader shift in how African businesses are beginning to see the continent as a market.

Progress has been steady, even if uneven. 49 states parties have exchanged tariff offers, with 46 verified by the AfCFTA Secretariat. 22 countries have gazetted their tariff schedules. More than 11,000 AfCFTA

certificates of origin have been issued, giving traders access to preferential markets within the continent.

The rules of origin have now been completed, providing a consistent regulatory basis for trade. Services liberalization is advancing through national schedules covering sectors such as finance, transport, tourism, communication, and business services. The Protocol on Digital Trade has been adopted, establishing a continental framework for e-commerce and data governance.

Financial integration is also progressing. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) is operational in eleven countries, allowing cross-border transactions in local currencies. While still limited in scale, this represents a practical step toward reducing transaction costs and reliance on external financial systems.

Taken together, these developments are steadily transforming the AfCFTA from an institutional project into a practical reality for businesses and traders across the continent.

Addis Abeba, Ethiopia:  
The Headquarters of the African Union.

## Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World

The AfCFTA is taking shape in a global context that is itself shifting. Economic power is becoming more dispersed, and traditional centers of influence are no longer as dominant. For Africa, this presents both risks and opportunities. Growing geopolitical competition, fragmented supply chains, and rising protectionism create new uncertainties for African economies. At the same time, they create incentives for deeper regional integration and stronger collective action.

By strengthening intra-continental integration, the AfCFTA enhances Africa's ability to negotiate collectively on issues such as debt, climate finance, and supply chains. It also allows for more balanced engagement with external partners, including the European Union, China, and India. While asymmetries remain, collective action strengthens Africa's negotiating position.

## A Mirror for Europe and Other Regions

For Europe, which has often regarded itself as the reference point for integration, Africa's approach offers a useful comparison. The European Union developed through deep legal harmonization among relatively aligned economies. Africa's integration, by contrast, begins from diversity and proceeds through gradual convergence. The European model emphasizes rule-making and standardization, whereas the AfCFTA places greater emphasis on coordination, flexibility, and policy space.

As European leaders grapple with fragmentation, economic divergence, and renewed debates on sovereignty, Africa's approach offers a different perspective. It suggests that flexibility does not necessarily undermine integration, but can be a condition for sustaining it. Where Europe's strength has traditionally been institutional depth, Africa's may



“The AfCFTA is taking shape in a global context that is itself shifting.”

lie in political adaptability, a form of cooperation designed to function despite structural differences.

The AfCFTA shows that integration can proceed without uniformity, and that cooperation can be sustained even in conditions of inequality. In a period where global systems are under strain, Africa's experience offers a valuable perspective on how integration can remain resilient, adaptive, and forward-looking.

## Conclusion: From Participation to Agency

Eight years after Kigali, the AfCFTA is better understood as a process rather than a single moment. Its progress is visible in practical developments: certificates of origin issued, businesses trading under AfCFTA preferences, payment systems facilitating cross-border transactions, and services commitments gradually taking shape. None of these developments is transformative on its own. Collectively, however, they reflect a continent steadily building the institutions, practices, and confidence necessary to shape more of its own economic future.

Africa is gradually exercising greater influence over the frameworks that shape its economic future. The AfCFTA reflects this shift through the development of institutions and rules grounded in African priorities. Its significance lies in strengthening the continent's capacity to shape its own development trajectory. For the strawberry exporter in Addis, this transformation is tangible. Faced with disruptions in traditional export markets, he found new opportunities within Africa itself. His experience reflects a broader realization among African businesses: a growing recognition that resilience can be built through African markets and African demand.

**Tsion Demissie Bergano** is a Legal and Institutional Matters Officer at the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat with expertise in international law, trade, and African economic integration. She has over eight years of experience within the African Union system, where she has worked on legal and policy issues relating to trade, migration, governance, and institutional development. She holds a Master's degree in Global Studies from the University of Leipzig.

# Revitalizing Europe:

## Civil Society and Civic Engagement as New Democratic Infrastructure

Photo: © adobe stock

by **Vedran Džihić**

In times of turmoil and crisis, there is one currency more important than the others – hope. There is perhaps no better point of departure for seeking hope today than returning to the moral and political vocabulary of the former dissident, writer, civic activist and later president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. Havel's life and work were built around the conviction that freedom, dignity, and truth in politics are never granted once and for all by institutions alone. Rather, they must be continuously

reclaimed, defended, and reimagined through the active engagement of citizens willing to act, to organize, and to resist even in moments when success seems improbable or distant. Havel's notion of hope is not a naive one. It is not a hope as optimism that things will necessarily turn out well, but as the certainty that something is worth doing regardless of how it turns out. His notion of hope is the one that captures profoundly what is politically at stake in Europe's present moment of democratic uncertainty, exhaustion, and all types of contestations.

### Structural Crisis of Democracy

What Europe faces today is not simply a passing political turbulence, nor merely a temporary crisis of representation that can be managed through technocratic adjustment or pragmatic reforms. Neither can it be managed by another cycle of institutional fine-tuning on the EU level or at the national level in member and candidate countries. It is rather a deeper and more structural crisis of democratic meaning, democratic legitimacy, and also democratic imagination unfolding in front of our

# “ In times of turmoil and crisis, there is one currency more important than the others – hope.”

eyes. Europe's current crisis unfolds under specific circumstances. In the majority of the EU member states, formal democratic institutions continue to function, elections continue to be held, parliaments continue to legislate, and governments continue to govern. Yet, large parts of society increasingly experience democracy itself as distant, procedural, emotionally empty, and incapable of generating either trust or belief in a common political future. In some other cases – like in Georgia and Serbia today and Hungary until the recent regime change – formal and procedural aspects of democracy are in place, yet countries are run by autocrats who offensively obscure democracy and use various forms of repression against their citizens. Citizens across the continent often do not reject democracy as a principle. What many reject is a version of democracy that appears managerial rather than transformative, reactive rather than visionary, and transactional rather than capable of inspiring collective belonging, solidarity, and hope. Despite the loss of Orbán's Fidesz in the recent elections in Hungary, we do not know which political forces profit the most. It might well be authoritarian forces inside and outside of Europe and its societies – far-right populist and nationalist forces who promise the return to a glorious past that never existed or a retrotopia with authoritarian brush strokes.

## Civil Society as Democracies' Essential Infrastructure

While democratic backsliding, shrinking civic spaces, the normalization of exclusionary nationalism, foreign

interference, disinformation, and the authoritarian temptation have become defining features of Europe's political landscape, one crucial insight has become unavoidable: democracies under pressure cannot be defended by state institutions alone. Neither can they be renewed solely through electoral competition or elite bargains. They require something broader, deeper, and more socially rooted – a whole-of-society democratic response in which civil society and civic engagement are understood not as decorative additions to an otherwise functioning democratic order, but rather as one of democracy's most essential infrastructures. These civil structures should be understood as the living arena in which democratic habits are learned, solidarities are forged, institutions are challenged, and political imagination is kept alive.

This understanding was once deeply embedded in Europe's democratic transformations, particularly in the East. There the great emancipatory movements of the late twentieth century demonstrated that democracy is rarely born from institutions alone, but rather from civic agency. From the civic courage of dissidents in communist Central Europe to the mobilizing force of Solidarność in Poland, courageous collective organisation and the willingness of ordinary citizens to become political subjects rather than passive objects of power was shown. Civil society was then understood as the school of democracy in the deepest sense, as a space where citizens learned responsibility, plurality, and action. It was a space where freedom became practice rather than abstraction, anchored

within a public realm understood as a space of contestation and beginning.

Yet over time, both in the East and West of Europe, something of this foundational understanding faded. In parts of post-communist Europe, particularly in my home region of the Western Balkans, civil society became increasingly professionalized, NGO-ized and donor-driven. It became often detached from wider social mobilization, performing indispensable work on rights, inclusion, accountability, and democratic reform, but frequently losing some of its transformative political energy as expertise replaced movement-building and project cycles replaced deeper civic enmeshment. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, civil society became normalized as part of democratic equilibrium. It became an indispensable but largely institutionalized component of checks and balances, welfare provision, solidarity, and moral advocacy, embodied by organizations such as Caritas here in Austria, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, trade unions, churches, local associations, and countless grassroots initiatives that quietly sustained democratic social life. Civil society became, in a sense, normal – important, respected, but politically somewhat domesticated.

## Authoritarian Turn Unites Civic Forces Across Europe

The current authoritarian turn has changed that equation fundamentally for those countries that took it. These are precisely the countries where civic activists face the most legal harassment, personal risk, and systematic

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Photo: © shutterstock

“Civil society and civic engagement are understood not as decorative additions to an otherwise functioning democratic order, but rather as one of democracy’s most essential infrastructures.”

Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Serbia,  
5 September 2025:  
Student protests against  
government corruption.

repression. Yet, one of the most revealing features of contemporary illiberal and authoritarian politics is precisely that it recognizes the political power of civil society more clearly than many liberals have done for decades. From Viktor Orbán’s and Aleksandar Vučić’s systematic attacks on independent NGOs, universities, artists, and journalists; to the culture-war assaults of the Alternative for Germany against so-called “left-liberal elites”; from the rhetoric of the FPÖ in Austria against “politically correct civil society”; to the broader anti-pluralist political repertoire associated with Donald Trump; what we witness is not merely hostility toward isolated organizations, but a deeper struggle over who constitutes “the people,” whose voices count, and which forms of civic organization are deemed legitimate. Authoritarian actors do not merely seek to weaken independent civic forces. They increasingly seek to build their own counter-civil societies embodied in nationalist

networks, culture-war organizations, pseudo-grassroots mobilizations, and moral communities built around exclusion, resentment, and the dangerous fantasy of a homogeneous notion of “our people” allegedly threatened by liberal pluralism and migration.

And yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in response to this pressure that Europe witnesses a remarkable and politically consequential re-politicization of civil society. This is a new civic awakening that suggests democratic energy is increasingly emerging from below – from movements, initiatives, protest networks, local solidarities, and newly mobilized citizens determined to resist democratic erosion. This civic courage under the conditions of the authoritarian turn is truly inspiring. It is the bravery, creativity and perseverance of so many civic actors and initiatives in countries like Serbia and Georgia, or previously Hungary, that inspires and unites civic forces in still

stable but contested democracies in the rest of the EU states. A new and broader civic horizon uniting European “West” and “East” is emerging.

### Resilience, Solidarity, and the Defense of Democracy through Civic Engagement

In Hungary, where over 16 years Orbán’s long project of illiberal state capture transformed institutions, media, and large parts of the political sphere, civic resistance continued to fight. This resistance provided moments of collective democratic courage, not least when public space itself became contested terrain – as demonstrated by mass mobilizations around Budapest Pride last year. While I underline the notion of civil society as a safeguard of democracy, the Hungarian case illustrates that dense civic networks can also facilitate democratic backsliding. The right-wing Civic Circles Movement mobilized broad segments of the educated middle

“ Every single act of civic engagement contributes to resilience, solidarity, and the defense of democracy.”

among many but that they represent the core democratic infrastructure, probably needed more today than ever in Europe since the end of the Second World War. If Europe is to resist democratic exhaustion and authoritarian temptation, it will have to rediscover what Havel knew, what Arendt taught, and what countless citizens across the continent are demonstrating every day: that freedom survives only where citizens act together, where plurality is defended, where solidarity is practiced, and where hope becomes political action. Those engaged citizens are new teachers in the school of democracy; they create an infrastructure of trust, build the arena of resistance, and by doing so give birth to political imagination without which European democracy cannot become believable again.

**Vedran Džihic** is a Senior Researcher at the oip and lecturer at the University of Vienna and University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He is also co-director of the Center for Advanced Studies Southeastern Europe (CAS SEE) at the University in Rijeka as well as member of BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group). His field of research are related to democracy and transition processes, European integration, civil society and protest movements, foreign policy, conflict research, and nationalism.

class and helped consolidate Orbán's political hegemony, demonstrating how “uncivil society” can strengthen illiberal and exclusionary politics rather than liberal democratic norms. This is why we cannot claim that Péter Magyar's victory is a straightforward result of civic engagement against Fidesz authoritarian rule. What we certainly can argue is that the spirit of resistance, criticism and insistence on facts and truth by so many civic forces – despite the dense “uncivil society” networks – in Hungary contributed to the fertile ground for political change in Hungary. Political change has not yet come to Serbia, but student movements since November 1st 2024, previous broad environmental protests against destructive mining projects (Rio Tinto) and countless acts of resistance against Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian and corrupt grip on power have created new and broader democratic coalitions. Coalitions that connect ecological justice, anti-clintelism, and demands for rule of law and accountable government, showing how resistance can unite very different segments of society around the defense of the common good. In Georgia, repeated mass mobilizations in defense of civic freedoms and against authoritarian drift have demonstrated the resilience of democratic aspiration even under intense political pressure and repression. While the situation in Georgia remains unchanged and the government keeps the repressive and authoritarian grip on the whole society, civic courage and engagement have not evaporated and are still there. In Poland, which saw a democratic change in 2023, women's protests, civic alliances, and broad democratic mobilization played a crucial role in resisting the authoritarian capture pursued by Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS. Polish civil society and various grassroots organizations and actions continue contributing to the still difficult and protracted process of democratic recovery. In the end, this is unimaginable without social energy organized beyond party structures. In Slovakia under Fico, artists, intellectuals, and

cultural workers resisting attempts at political control over public institutions have defended precisely those autonomous spaces in which democratic plurality breathes. Looking more toward so-called “old members” of the EU such as Austria and Germany, there are many cases of broad civic mobilizations against remigration fantasies, far-right normalization, and exclusionary nationalism. Every single act of civic engagement contributes to resilience, solidarity, and the defense of democracy. After the US' obvious authoritarian turn, we saw various moments of new civic coalitions standing up against authoritarian presidentialism, against the hollowing out of institutions, and in defense of constitutional democracy and rights.

## European Infrastructure of Trust

What unites these very different cases – be it in democratic states or in those that can be characterized as competitive autocracies – is not ideological uniformity, but something more fundamental: the redefinition and rediscovery of civic agency. Hannah Arendt's insight that politics begins wherever human beings act together in plurality, whenever they leave private isolation and enter the public realm as speaking and acting citizens capable of initiating something new, reminds us of the power lying in the human capacity for new beginnings and action. Arendt's notion of miracle, which emerged when people come together and act together for some higher good, is what vibrant civic spaces and acts of engagement preserve. They keep the notion of possibility, of alternatives to abusive forms of power, and of human dignity alive.

Europe's democratic renewal requires a new civic horizon rooted in active hope, in political imagination, in empathy and solidarity, and in the conviction that democracy must again become something lived, practiced, and emotionally meaningful. I argue that civil society and civic engagement are not merely one democratic sector

# Young Voices of the oiiip

The young voices of the oiiip are current interns who shared their perspectives on pressing international issues, sources of hope for the future, and recommendations for world leaders.

A second opportunity emerges from energy insecurity. The Strait of Hormuz crisis is a long-overdue wake-up call: Europe's dependence on fossil fuels also means dependence on geopolitical chokepoints. While diversification is necessary in the short term, the long-term opportunity lies in accelerating renewable energy, grids, storage and green technologies. This would reduce strategic vulnerabilities while also contributing to climate change mitigation. The challenge is to turn crisis-driven responses into durable capacity without allowing flexibility to become fragmentation.

**Karla Heltriegel**, Germany, BA International Relations and International Organizations (IRIO) (University of Groningen)



**Question: Where do you see opportunity for change in the current unstable times?**

"We are not in a transition – we are in a rupture." Mark Carney's remark in Davos captures a shift in which the global order is being reshaped under pressure. The crises confronting this order question existing rules and alliances. Yet, Europe's opportunity lies in transforming short-term crisis responses into

long-term strategic capacity under conditions of uncertainty. One opportunity is European security. The war in Ukraine has accelerated debates on strategic autonomy, joint defence, and the EU's geopolitical role. However, the more realistic opening is not immediate autonomy, but practical agency: Europe can become better at coordinating fast, targeted responses when larger institutions are blocked. Minilateral formats, such as the "coalition of the willing" supporting Ukraine, show how smaller groups of states can act more quickly where consensus is difficult. Their value lies not in replacing NATO or the EU, but in testing "complementary forms" of flexible cooperation that could later strengthen broader European security governance.



**Question: How do we build pathways forward in a world facing overlapping crises?**

Over halfway through the 2020s, a global pandemic, climate disasters, and ongoing armed conflicts have left us waking up to one crisis after another. This persistent state of "poly-crisis" has desensitized many to suffering and tempted

us to lose faith in the values that have underpinned global stability for decades. In this climate of exhaustion, the impulse to retreat into isolationism is growing, leading to a dangerous erosion of the principles that once guided us.

This retreat is starkly evident in the flawed argument that distant democracies can remain safe from authoritarian

expansion. We see this when leaders treat the Russian invasion of Ukraine or Chinese threats to Taiwan as “not our war” due to geographical distance. However, we must confront a stark reality: first they erase democracy in Hong Kong, then they violently invade Ukraine; if we keep on ignoring these threats, who will defend us when our allies are gone? The liberal values of freedom and democracy are not regional luxuries, but a global infrastructure that protects us all. Abandoning them invites a return to a world governed by violence rather than justice.

To move forward, we must recognize that authoritarian expansionism does not stop at distant borders. Their erosive tactics, specifically hybrid threats, are refined in active conflict zones before being exported elsewhere, as current destabilization in Europe vividly demonstrates. Democracies must overcome this delusional sense of safety and collectively reject authoritarian expansion. Restabilizing the world requires a reaffirmed commitment to the international liberal order to guide us through these crises and restore future prosperity.

**Shih-Cheng Ho**, Taiwan, MA Programme Political Science (University of Vienna)



**Question: How do we build pathways forward in a world facing overlapping crises?**

Times of multiple crises threaten democracies not only from the outside, but also from within, as insecurity erodes trust in institutions and fuels polarization. Developments underscore the importance of rule-of-law elements such as the separation

of powers and democratically legitimized institutions. Yet, democratic resilience depends not only on institutions, but also on a resilient civil society and social cohesion. Both of which require the effective protection of fundamental rights, especially freedom of expression, press and assembly.

To this end, legislators must enact laws that safeguard democracy. A significant international step is the EU’s Anti-SLAPP Directive (strategic lawsuit against public participation), which aims to protect journalists, activists and scientists from abusive, intimidating lawsuits. Key mechanisms include early dismissals and cost-shifting to plaintiffs. Although legal scholars criticize its limited scope, the EU is thus sending an important message in

opposition to the intimidation of these public watchdogs. Crucial will now be how rigorously the member states implement this directive into national law.

Another complementary path through and out of times of crisis lies at the societal level, as legal protection alone is insufficient. Populist rhetoric and social media increasingly shift the boundaries of acceptable discourse, fueling linguistic degradation, the erosion of taboos and disparagement. Yet, especially in times of crisis, it becomes clear how deeply democratic societies rely on the capacity for dialogue, mutual respect and social solidarity. “Building pathways forward” may therefore begin not with grand solutions, but with small, conscious choices: fostering dialogue instead of division and strengthening civil society against growing polarization.

**Emilia Webhofer**, Austria, MA Business Law (WU Vienna)



**Question: Where do you see opportunity for change in the current unstable times?**

Instability is disorienting, but it can also be the condition under which the most durable transformations become possible. The crises converging today, like democratic backsliding, geopolitical fragmentation, climate disruption, and economic precarity, are not merely threats; they are forcing a reassessment of the rules, alliances, and economic models that defined the last three decades and are now visibly failing.

One opportunity might lie in the reorganisation of global power itself. The current moment of institutional tension and instability in the US is distressing, but middle powers and regional actors, such as the EU, the African Union, ASEAN, could make room for themselves and finally assert their greater capacity for action. While this more equitable order would initially be marked by institutional friction and heightened geopolitical risk, including the increasingly open use of force by stronger states against weaker neighbors, as seen in Russia’s war in Ukraine, it may ultimately prove more resilient and representative than the hierarchies it is replacing. A second opportunity is generational. The civic energy visible in recent protest movements – from Serbia (2025) and Bangladesh (2024) to Turkey (2025) – signals that democratic commitment has not eroded. Young people are not disengaged; they are building new political vocabularies and forms of solidarity that institutions have not yet caught up to.

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# Young Voices

Finally, this moment presents an opening for structural modernization. Rising energy insecurity makes investment in renewables economically and strategically rational, not merely an environmental imperative. AI, meanwhile, can support this transition by augmenting human capabilities and reshaping education toward the adaptable skills a rapidly changing world demands.

Unstable times create a unique moment to rethink priorities: the challenge is not to restore what was, but to build forward with greater honesty about what the old order failed to deliver.

**Giuditta Fiori**, Italy, International MA in Security, Intelligence, and Strategic Studies (IMSIS) (University of Glasgow)



## Question: Where do you see opportunity for change in the current unstable times?

The contemporary youth of western democracies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean are inheriting societies from their predecessors who are significantly more socially atomized and economically stratified than seen before in recent memory. In the absence of radical course correction, the ramifications of this civilizational trajectory will likely define the rest of their lives long after their parents and grandparents are gone. I believe the best opportunity for change today is for those of us who are politically active to build a metaphorical “bigger tent” in which most people fit and whose foundations rest on universal issues – specifically affordability and livability above all else. Growing up, many of my peers struggled with groceries and rent while politics seemed to focus on everything else but that. This is a real disconnect felt by the people left behind in wealthy democracies. Our societies promise opportunity and equality but sometimes the economic landscape can be bereft of both. Even European social democracies with generous welfare states have historically failed to make the necessary accommodations to absorb the negative impact of macroeconomic shifts like deindustrialization and automation. It’s important to recognize the opportunity in this failure – the potential for political mobilization around progressive causes. Issues of bread and butter have the greatest potential for universal appeal because they are felt ubiquitously. Yet, the current landscape of politics in the western world is characterized by intense tribal divisions that typically fall along identitarian fault lines – this is counter-productive

to generating real impact for the working person. A world where most people find themselves engaged in grievance-based struggles is a world where people are already divided and conquered by those with self-serving interests.

**Jens Wirth Salander**, Sweden/USA, MSc. War Studies (Swedish Defense University)



## Question: How do we build pathways forward in a world facing overlapping crises?

In an age of overlapping crises, political discourse seems to become louder, faster, and more emotionally charged. The loudest reaction is often mistaken for the strongest leadership. Yet, restraint can matter just as much when it comes to finding solutions that actually last.

Urgency increasingly dominates public debate: from armed conflicts to climate emergencies, political actors are pushed to respond immediately, often driven by acute emotional pressure rather than long-term perspective. This does not just shape the tone; it also narrows what can be said and imagined. Complex realities get flattened into rigid moral positions and the space for negotiation quietly shrinks.

Pathways forward emerge when political responses are not driven by urgency alone, but by the space to think beyond immediate friction. They also depend on whether public attention rewards escalation, or whether there is still space for more careful, measured forms of engagement. In practice, restraint in politics means resisting the impulse to turn every crisis into a definitive, reactive stance. Lasting solutions rarely come out of environments dominated by public outrage. More often, they depend on the ability to keep dialogue going even when agreement feels distant, ensuring that political space remains open even in moments of intense pressure.

Restraint should not be confused with passivity. In moments of instability, it creates room for negotiation and longer-term thinking. Without it, even basic cooperation becomes harder. In a world defined by constant uncertainty, the ability to communicate crises without making them worse may be one of the most important political capacities we have.

**Tara Petkov**, Austria, MA (Mag. iur.) in Law (Johannes Kepler University) and BA in Political Science (University of Vienna)

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Responsible for the content:  
Cengiz Günay, Petra Podesser,  
Tara Petkov, Emilia Webhofer

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Jens Wirth Salander, Wyatt Cole

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